

On Screen



THE DEER HUNTER, starring Robert De Niro, John Cazale, John Savage, Christopher Walken, Meryl Streep; written by Deric Washburn; story by Michael Cimino & Washburn and Louis Garfinkle & Quinn K. Redeker; directed by Cimino.

In many ways this is yet another American buddy movie, full of inarticulate but sensitive slob who backslap and drink a lot, but what distinguishes *The Deer Hunter* from the rest of the motley pack is the intensity of emotions, underplayed but understood, provided by a flawless cast. I think the Academy should cancel its annual awards celebration this year and just send all pertinent Oscars to *The Deer Hunter*'s creators. De Niro and Walken, in particular, are awesome in what they bring to their basically underwritten roles.

The film is about friendship and survival and the relationship of the two at home and at war. Three Pennsylvania steel workers—De Niro, Savage and Walken—enlist in the Army in 1968; before leaving Savage is married and the others, with pals Cazale, George Dzundza and Chuck Aspergren, go off on one last deer hunt. The wedding and reception, in full Russian-immigrant splendor, take up about 45 wonderful minutes, during which Walken proposes to Streep, she accepts, and De Niro casts some intense glances at her. In fact, the looks De Niro directs at Streep are more longing, sexy and sweet than many an explicit love scene.

The deer hunt is a bit heavy-handed in its symbolism: the church choir from the wedding, no less, booms away in "heaven" as De Niro stalks his buck and makes his one-shot kill; apparently Cimino wanted to make sure we understood that the hunt is An Allegory. There are other jarring or frustrating moments, as when De Niro, home from Viet Nam, mentions a wound that is never explained; Savage's wife is a speechless zombie in one scene, normal in her next. But these are small carps for a film that is warm and loving and utterly terrifying. The contrast—and connection—between home and distant war is so disturbing I marvel at how returning vets ever adjust, even the strong, silent self-reliant ones like De Niro's character, who almost single-handedly rescues himself and his two friends from a numbingly frightening Russian roulette game staged by their Cong captors.

The final scene, which usually sends audi-

ences out of the theatre in silent introspection, was at first distressing; I couldn't imagine people attending the funeral of a dear friend killed in Viet Nam and then sitting down around a table singing "God Bless America." But there is no irony or bitterness implied, just sadness and the support of surviving friends; they never questioned the war before they went, and perhaps they never will, even though the terrible physical and emotional effects will linger with them all ways.

By the end of this three-hour (but never dragging) masterpiece I cared about these people as if I'd grown up with them; I sometimes catch myself wondering how they're doing, and I have to remind myself that it's only a movie.

Judith Sims

KING OF THE GYPSIES, starring Eric Roberts, Sterling Hayden, Shelley Winters and Brooke Shields; written and directed by Frank Pierson.

Here he is again: that street-wise, dark-haired, lusty, excitable, charming Eastern city boy—full of his subculture's passionate, life-loving ways, but seething and finally exploding with inarticulate rage at the stupid cruelty of almost everyone else around him. You loved him in *The Godfather*, *Mean Streets*, *Saturday Night Fever*, and *Bloodbrothers*—at least *somebody* did—so no wonder he's back. Only, for variety's sake, he's not Italian this time. He's a gypsy, played by the heralded new actor Eric Roberts, who looks, sounds and pounds his fist against the wall pretty much like all the other heralded new actors of this star-hatching genre.

The gypsy angle is about the only thing that distinguishes this movie from others of its kind—except for its inferiority to the rest. *Gypsies* is nothing more than a sort of poor ethnic joke. Someone could and maybe

someday will make a film that conveys the alternating color, darkness and humor of America's gypsies, who contemptuously hang onto their customs and delight in spitting on the 20th Century.

But Frank Pierson made *this* film. There was once some hope that his career would bloom into something interesting—though he directed the last *A Star Is Born* and committed other minor crimes, he *had* previously scripted *Dog Day Afternoon*. *Gypsies*, though, crushes any hope for him; it was made with slick, cold calculation and little else. The plot was "suggested by" the 1974 non-fiction book of the same title by Peter Maas (*Serpico*, *The Valachi Papers*). The characters and events have been changed, omitted, added, romanticized and hyped-up to fit the *Godfatherish* mold.

The film's Dave Stepanowicz (Roberts' part) possesses all the good qualities of Steve Tene (the book's protagonist) and few of his faults. The fact that our hero in the book financed most of his teenage years by being a homosexual prostitute somehow gets left out. Wonder why? He remains, though, the reluctant chosen heir to his grandfather's "royal" title, still in conflict with his brutish father over rights to that honor, with vague ambitions about leading his people from larceny to learning.

It's all only mildly ludicrous until the film's climactic convulsions. The events in the book were unresolved, so Pierson wraps things up with the bloody deaths of two characters. Both scenes are stunningly crass. One copies the *Mean Streets* car crash scene almost shot-for-shot, the other unnecessarily has our hero made to look like a cold-blooded murderer (they could have at least given the other guy a gun). "It's almost his time," the ads say. Oh great.

Terry Atkinson

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