

Film

The Postman Always Rings Twice
Starring Jack Nicholson and Jessica Lange
Directed by Bob Rafelson
McDonald Theater

Some things never change: A drifter finds a sexy, bored wife and her doltish husband running a roadside tavern. He seizes her the first chance he gets. She matches his passion in every encounter. They try to murder her husband and fail. They try to leave and fail. They try to murder him again and succeed. They get caught. And so it goes . . .

Or so it would seem. But what if they got away with it? Do they live happily ever after? Or does their shared guilt lead to inevitable tragedy? The constellation of people, events and emotions which lead to tragedy are almost mythic — this story has been told many, many times.

James M. Cain's 1934 novel, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, poses a different question: Can Frank and Cora's obsession with one another lead in any other direction but tragedy?

Director Bob Rafelson's remake is the second American film version of Cain's controversial, banned-in-Boston novel. The story is as simple as the characters that live in it: Frank, an aimless drifter past his prime; Cora, a young, sultry ex-beauty queen; and Nick, an arrogant and ignorant Greek immigrant. Frank and Cora fulfill a need in each other that neither understands. Nor does it matter. They share an identity expressed in their passionate coupling: A need to transcend, through lovemaking, the hopelessness in their lives. Their ob-

session is so violent and tenacious, so out of control, that murder is the only logical step in a doomed sequence.

Frank and Cora are simple, stupid people. We don't know who they are or what drives them so compulsively. Rafelson, true to the book's spirit, isn't interested in exploring the couple's moral values. The pair aren't remotely interested in why they are so compelled to have each other at any cost. When Cora tells Frank, "I don't care what's right or wrong anymore," they have reached a point where any consideration, practical or spiritual, is unimportant.

Cora is looking for an identity in sexual release. Frank willingly supplies it. The violent nature of their coupling reinforces the fatality of their relationship, the desperation in each encounter, as if it will be their last.

The expression of violent eroticism as the prime mover of the succeeding action is steamingly explicit. Rafelson understands that anything less than violent, sweaty mating betrays the power of the story.

The setting is as gritty as the characters. Rafelson creates an atmosphere as depressing as the story he's telling. It's no surprise that the book uses the Depression as its background. This particular period stresses the hopelessness of Frank and Cora's relationship and makes *The Postman* a truly American story.

Rafelson has made a handsome, studied film. The camera lingers over the grime under Frank's fingernails, the runs in Cora's stockings. There's a patina of grease and age over everything.

The bright lights and dreams



The Postman Always Rings Twice — "in the heat of passion" — is now at the McDonald Theater in the Eugene Downtown Mall.

of Los Angeles are only twenty miles away, yet the feeling of isolation and despair are everywhere. His careful use of shadow and light express the subtle changes in mood — rage, passion, despair, isolation — all are seen in the way a room changes its color with the feeling of its inhabitants. The tenderness that develops between Frank and Cora is bathed in soft light, their passion is played out in dark, dingy rooms.

Rafelson creates tension by keeping each scene stripped of anything more than essentials. The audience has to rely on instinct to make the necessary connections between feeling and action. In one scene, Frank leaves the cafe, glances back

once, then heads down the road. In the next he is pulling a tire of its rim with a crowbar.

We must make the connection, and all we have to go on is one glance from Cora to Frank in the lunchroom. Jessica Lange throws out a tremendous amount of feeling in that glance, powerful enough to make us understand why Frank is working in that gas station. No explanation is necessary — he's not surprised to be there and she's not surprised to see him back. Instinct guides this story through all its sordid and tragic paces.

Rafelson demands as much subtlety from his actors as his sets. Jessica Lange gives a tremendous performance as Cora. She is all at once sensual

and vulnerable, a child-woman who is both victim and victimizer.

Lange begins as a sullen, violent goddess who eagerly drives her lover to murder, then celebrates her triumph by making love over her husband's body. She ends as a lonely, vulnerable child that begs to be loved.

She is called upon to show anger, passion, and fright in the extreme, which she does. But it's during the quiet moments when she really shows her skill. The way she glances at Frank across the lunchroom counter for the first time leaves no doubt of her intentions and that he'll never leave.

Rafelson's ability to bring this out in her performance is crucially important. Cain's story is told by Frank, but Rafelson wisely chose not to use narration. Instead he depends on his actors to give us the feelings that Frank describes. Lange does it beautifully.

The Postman is really her film. Jack Nicholson is only a consort, a role he gracefully accepts. He has been criticized for being nothing more than a character actor in *The Postman*. As Frank, a petty thief and drifter, he isn't needed to give a large performance.

Frank is a small man — small dreams, small hopes, small expectations. The only thing he's ever really wanted is Cora and even so, she is the fire behind all their schemes. If Nicholson had overplayed his part, the story would have lost all of its balance and most of the power.

Frank initiates their slide into hell, but it is Cora who leads him there. In this, Nicholson remains true to the book. Occasionally he appears almost in awe of Cora's strength, of the pragmatic streak that runs through her. Always the opportunist, he simply seizes on her dreams and makes them his own. Not the kind of part for a leading man, but Nicholson gives a fine performance by carefully tuning himself into Lange's Cora. With John Colicos as Nick, Cora's husband, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* is a fine ensemble performance.

— Sally Oljar

Thursday, April 16, 1981

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Well, while I write this little box-ful, it is bright and sunny outside. Everyone has been pleasant enough to mention just how nice it is outside . . . I heard rain's coming. Sigh.

I'd very much like to thank Sherry for coming in and being so efficient; Cindy for her incredible one-lense glasses; Steve for the plant; all the bookers I talked to for their spare moments; Tamara for the mint; Sally O. for her effervescent words; and Jerril for keeping me posted.

Remember that Thursday's the day for the *Thursday Revue* stuff. I need it the week prior to publication so I can graduate and still get the issue out. Thanks!

One last thing. *The Return of the Secaucus Seven* is showing at Cinema 7 — sorry to have spaced that out. Double sigh. *Ert-zi*.



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