

ON SCREEN

Ragtime

starring James Cagney, Brad Dourif, Mary Steenburgen; written by Michael Weller from the novel by E. L. Doctorow; directed by Milos Forman.

Ragtime is dizzy kitsch and lots of fun. It's also a colossal two-and-a-half-hour-long fake. Not even a construction crane could suspend the necessary disbelief. One well-intentioned miscalculation follows the next until there's so much wrong it's hard to keep it all straight.

How can we give ourselves over to a film whose sets and locations look like sets and locations, and whose costumes look like costumes? They have been carefully chosen, but like the rest of the film, with the exception of some performances, they exist only as concepts. In short, nothing looks *lived in*. Compare the Lower East Side sequence in *Ragtime* with a similar reconstruction in *Godfather II* and the difference becomes obvious. In the latter we are *there* and in the other, well, we're not.

E.L. Doctorow's novel was a masterfully satisfying entertainment. A handful of figures from the early years of the 20th century (some famous, some fictional) were made to represent certain political, social and aesthetic forces struggling to be born, e.g. black rights, women's lib and motion pictures. As the narrative hoppedscotched from character to character their paths (and concerns) constantly crisscrossed. The pacing was brisk, the prose style uncluttered. A leisurely epoch was limned in quick sketches. It was like watching some secretly shot movie of bygone lives — both public and private. Just enough descriptive detail was provided for us, the readers, to fill in the rest. This may be why the book is more immediate than the Milos Forman film. Not only has all the work been done for us up there on the screen — it also hasn't been done *right*. Not only production design, but script and direction are at fault.

Most importantly, the story is lopsided. The climax of aggrieved blacks occupying New York's J.P. Morgan Library is drawn out way too long (possibly to allow James Cagney as Police

Commissioner enough screen time to justify his star billing). The other characters are thus deprived of important scenes that would make many of the actions more comprehensible.

The acting is fine — Mary Steenburgen, Robert Joy, Brad Dourif, Mandy Patinkin and Cagney are great to watch. So is lovely Elizabeth McGovern. She's as natural here as she was in *Ordinary People*. It's a deft and charming performance, full of humor — the only problem is that it's in the wrong movie. It has as much to do with 1900 as Deborah Harry has to do with Scott Joplin. This contemporary viewpoint is built into the film and is its second most serious flaw. It comes out in dialogue, mannerisms and motivations (or lack of same). In 1900 blacks *may* have called each other "brother," young ladies *may* have been upfront about sex and money, middle-class white boys *may* have become disillusioned with their hypocritical dads and joined black terrorist groups. It's possible, but the burden is on *Ragtime* to make us believe it. It doesn't.

Ragtime should have been a TV

mini-series with all the much-needed explanations the movie lacks, or it should have been drastically rethought for the screen. It's a shame. The film is high-spirited and, for the first part, very enjoyable in spite of its errors. Yet after two hours there have been too many manipulations and it finally collapses under them.

Richard Blackburn

Whose Life Is It Anyway?

starring Richard Dreyfuss, John Cassavetes and Carol Lahti; written by Brian Clark & Reginald Rose; directed by John Badham.

The choice of Dreyfuss to star as a sculptor paralyzed by an auto accident is a mixed blessing — he is so vital, so irrepressibly alive, that he rivets our attention and squeezes every laugh and tear that can be squeezed. But this very energy almost (but just almost) negates the hopelessness of his condition; it is difficult to believe that someone so intelligent and perceptive would want to end his life

simply because he can't move his arms and legs.

And that is the story — he wants to die, but the doctor in charge (Cassavetes) refuses to accede to this wish, instead threatening to have Dreyfuss committed to a home where he'll be kept alive for years. Dreyfuss is not easily defeated, but the film is not simply their confrontation. It deals with Dreyfuss' effect on the lives of another doctor, Lahti, who is drawn to him emotionally, a reggae-fied orderly, and a pretty young nurse, among others.

On the surface, a film about a paralyzed man who wants to die is not exactly cheerful holiday fare. But it is a good movie, not an expensive one, not a garish one. Just good; it makes us think and feel, laugh and cry, and there's not much more we can ask, in this or any other season.

Judith Sims

Absence of Malice

starring Paul Newman and Sally Field; written by Kiri Luedtke; directed by Sydney Pollack.

We really didn't need this — a confusing, stupid movie about journalistic ethics, or lack thereof. Sally Field portrays a Miami reporter who prints a false story (leaked to her in a most questionable manner) claiming that businessman Newman is under investigation by a strike force in the disappearance of a local longshoremen's union leader. Newman is innocent, naturally, and proceeds to set the record straight. In the process he and Field have a few go-rounds, and almost everyone gets his or her comeuppance in the end. Well, fine — except that it's all framed in pretentious, preachy, muddled blather about "the public's right to know" and revealing or not revealing sources, and using the press to advance one's own ambitions, blah blah. *Absence of Malice* manages to add fuel and a wet blanket to the flaming topic of journalistic ethics.

Parts of the film are just foolish. Newman, hurt, asks Field "Don't you know me yet?" Meaning how could she think him a hood when they've been going steady for two nights in a row. Much worse are the scenes at the newspaper, where Field has to be reminded by the paper's attorney to get a quote from Newman (when Newman doesn't answer his phone, she doesn't bother to call again. Give me a *break*). Field shows no qualms about printing stories based on the most tenuous — or off-the-record — sources, then turns around and prints the name and abortion date of a timid source who responds to the public shame with suicide.

But the Worst Line of the Year Award goes to writer Luedtke for the following exchange. Field, in reply to Newman's comment that she wears no wedding ring, therefore must be single: "You ever hear of liberation?" Newman: "Yeah, but they're all ugly."

Nothing rings true. This was obviously intended as a serious look at the sometimes shoddy practices reporters use to get their stories, but the intention dealt a mere glancing blow to the execution. Luedtke, according to the production notes, has been a journalist for more than twenty years, at the *Miami Herald* and the *Detroit Free Press*. There is very little evidence of that experience on the screen.

Judith Sims

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Just a few more days full of dread exams and last-minute plans about *How to Get Home Cheaply* — and then, at last, the big winter relief of *The Holidays*. Thanksgiving turkey, pumpkin pie and cranberry sauce; Christmas turkey (maybe a ham), apple pie and presents; "Auld Lang Syne" and the Rose Bowl and potato chips and beer. Small wonder that the earth seems to move in early January, it's just our annual national post-holiday belch.

But enough of these culinary slaverings. We're here to write about movies and another distinctly American tradition: the sudden appearance of dozens of blockbuster films every December, at which time the film studios hope to change their year-end ink from red to black, and maybe influence an Oscar nomination or two.

Here, then, is a rundown of those movies that will light up screens across the country (release dates vary wildly from region to region) this holiday season. And don't forget: movie theaters are full of popcorn, cokes, fujubes, Milk Duds...

REDS stars Warren Beatty as American journalist John Reed, best known for his eyewitness assessment of the Russian Revolution in his 1919 book *Ten Days that Shook the World*. Diane Keaton plays the love interest, author Louise Fletcher, and Jack Nicholson is playwright Eugene O'Neill. The whole thing took five years and an estimated \$40 million to complete — more than the Russian Revolution itself.

RAGTIME, the long-delayed film version of E. L. Doctorow's bestseller, brings us that innovative mix of fictional and real characters, played by James Cagney, Mary Steenburgen, Brad Dourif, Norman Mailer (reportedly excellent), and Howard E. Rollins as Coalhouse Walker.

TAPS stars Timothy Hutton as an upright, do-right cadet at an eastern military academy; George C. Scott is the head man, and conflict abounds. **MODERN PROBLEMS**, Chevy Chase without Goldie Hawn. Chase is an air traffic controller who develops telekinetic powers. But does he develop acting talent?

NEIGHBORS, from the Thomas Berger novel, pits quiet suburbanites John Belushi and Kathryn Walker against the New Couple — weird and wacky Dan Aykroyd and Cathy Moriarty (from *Raging Bull*).

WHOSE LIFE IS IT ANYWAY? was a successful Broadway play for the past few years. This version stars Richard Dreyfuss as a sculptor who loses the use of his arms and legs after an auto accident. His decision to end his life meets with strong resistance from doctor John Cassavetes, and with emotionally charged sympathy from doctor Carol Lahti. In spite of the grim subject, Dreyfuss is funny, engaging, and compelling (see review this issue).

PENNIES FROM HEAVEN. We've been waiting for this one for months, ever since MGM teased the press with clips and set visits back in the spring. Steve Martin departs from his jerky comedian persona and plays a 1930s

song salesman who dreams of living out the sweet songs he sells as an escape from his harsh Depression reality. Though married, he falls in love with hard-luck beauty Bernadette Peters. Christopher Walken (who won an Academy Award for his supporting role in *The Deer Hunter*) plays a dancing pimp who knows a good thing — Peters — when he sees her. The sets are fabulous: an old-fashioned bank turns into a Busby Berkeley dance scene, while Martin and Peters are watching the movie *Follow the Fleet*, they imagine themselves doing the same "Let's Face the Music and Dance" number — and sure enough, we see Steve and Bernadette in the same Astaire and Rogers costumes, on the same set, doing the same dance.

BUDDY, BUDDY is the American remake of a fine French comedy (originally translated as *A Pain in the Ass*), with Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthau in place of Jacques Brel and Lino Ventura. It's about a hit man, Matthau, hired to assassinate a government witness, but he's constantly interrupted by the suicidal bozo in the next hotel room (Lemmon). It's directed by Billy Wilder, who's been away too long.

SHARKY'S MACHINE. Burt Reynolds is an Atlanta vice detective investigating a series of call girl murders. Model Rachel Ward, in her first screen role, is a call girl, and we're promised that *Sharky's Machine* wallows in every possible seedy element.

ROLLOVER gives us Jane Fonda as the chairman of the board of a large corporation, and Kris Kristofferson (wearing a suit, but not a beard) as the head of a failing New York bank. It's billed as a thriller/love story.

ON GOLDEN POND shows how three generations interact emotionally one summer, and it stars Henry Fonda and Katherine Hepburn as Jane Fonda's parents. It opens in two theaters in December, countrywide in late January.

GHOST STORY is an intricate thriller in which the ghost of a murdered woman returns to haunt (and wreak revenge upon) the four pillars of the community who did her in. Stars Fred Astaire, Patricia Neal, the late Melvyn Douglas, Craig Wasson (as Douglas' son), Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., and Alice Krige as a mysterious beauty.

HEARTBEEPS stars Andy Kaufman and Bernadette Peters as robots who yearn to be free. And so they wander off and have many adventures.

FOUR FRIENDS is screenwriter Steve (Breaking Away, *Eyewitness*) Tesich's autobiographical look at four close friends, the Sixties and East Chicago, with Craig Wasson, Jodi Thelen, Jim Metzler, and Michael Huddleston.

Please remove bats, bow beads, and ponder this loss: there is no Clint Eastwood movie this holiday season. There has always been a holiday Eastwood. Is this the end of the world we've been bearing so much about lately?