

distractions

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graphic by
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A look at the new season

Pennies From Heaven
Steve Martin, Bernadette Peters
Cinema World

What happens when the optimism of Hollywood musicals and the American Dream collides with the Real World?

"Pennies From Heaven."

If you're willing to put aside the "wild and crazy" image of Steve Martin for a while (not an easy task), "Pennies From Heaven" works. Director Herb Ross uses an interesting inversion of the classic Hollywood musical to effectively portray the collapse of the American Dream against the harsh battlements of the real world.

The real world, in this case, is that of The Great Depression. It's 1934, and Martin is a starry-eyed sheet music salesman who wants to "live in a world where the songs come true," kind of like a tall, dopey-looking male Dorothy Gale.

Martin makes his way over the rainbow, but only for brief moments when depressing situations are replaced with optimistic production numbers starring Martin, Bernadette Peters, and other cast members. These bubbles burst quickly, however, and we are back where we started, in the middle of the Great Depression.

Martin's dream world is shattered by lust, greed, deceit and injustice. Nothing remains pure and untouched by the ravages of the grimy world of reality. Even his perfect love with an innocent school teacher (Peters) is ruined, by his own deceit and lust. He returns to his shrewish wife (Jessica Harper), while Peters, now pregnant,

becomes a prostitute.

Writer Dennis Potter shows us a grim world where nothing is fair and life is a cheat. This view is in stark contrast to the rose-colored world of Martin's dreams.

Although "Pennies From Heaven" deals with a serious issue, it's not as heavy as it sounds. It's hard to imagine a blend of "Death of a Sales-

man" and "The Wizard of Oz," but somehow Ross makes "Pennies From Heaven" work. The excellent musical productions and Martin's whimsical characterization keep the film light and lively — a pleasure from start to finish.

Unfortunately, Martin can seem too whimsical at times. It is easy to be sidetracked into his "wild and crazy"

image, and the important dramatic aspect of the film can be lost.

In spite of this temptation, "Pennies From Heaven" is a fascinating look at the mythology and the realities of the working life in capitalist America. It's also a lot of fun.

by matt meyer
and wendy perrotta

Magic that warms the heart

Heartland
Conchata Ferrell, Rip Torn
Valley River Twin Cinema

The first time I saw "Heartland" was in a small theatre just off Times Square. It had been a rather busy, frenetic day outside; but as the lights went down and the images began to appear on the screen, I was no longer in New York City. "Heartland" was able to envelop me that strongly and completely into its reality. The film has that sort of magic to it.

"Heartland" is a special film. It's not Burt Reynolds smashing up the bad guy's car. It's not a group of grisly fiends rising up from their graves to avenge untimely and poorly motivated deaths. It's not even Walter Matthau and Jack Lemmon horsing around. "Heartland" is a quiet, warm film which creates its own pace and story with a simple eloquence that is usually found only in real life — seldom in a movie.

The film is set in 1910 and concerns a woman (Conchata Ferrell) who, along with her nine year old daughter, is seeking employment as a cook and housekeeper in the wilds of Wyoming.

She is offered such a position by a hard working, no-nonsense rancher and widower (Rip Torn). We see their relationship develop over the space of a year from a shaky beginning to a sense of mutual responsibility, and finally to a level of love and partnership as they go through the various trials and day-to-day experiences of the frontier life. These delicate layers of experience are brought into especially sharp focus during a long snow-bound winter.

That's the story line. What the film is really about goes much deeper.

Partially funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (to my knowledge this is the first film meant for commercial distribution to receive such a grant and, what with all the recent cutbacks, probably will be the last), "Heartland" was meticulously researched and, by all accounts, faithfully presented.

For instance: the props are all either antiques or authentic reproductions and have a well-used look to them; the house has actual hardwood floors so that when an actor walks across them with those rough-hewn boots, you

hear the sharp clump, not the muffled sound of a Hollywood sound stage; the methods of ranching, plowing (which, by the way, the woman does, the garden being her responsibility), stringing a fence, doing the washing, branding the cattle, etc., are all presented the way they were actually done.

One also feels a sense of commitment to the film and its message, not only from the writer and director, but also from the actors. One senses that this isn't just another job for them. Perhaps part of that stems from the actors being totally immersed in the action. During the round-up and branding sequence, for example, there aren't any stuntmen used, the actors themselves do all the roping and branding.

There is also a tremendously engrossing and moving scene in which Ferrell and Torn deliver a calf which is upside down in the womb by reaching inside the cow, attaching a rope to the calf's hooves and pulling. There is a strong sense of involvement in this sequence not only from

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