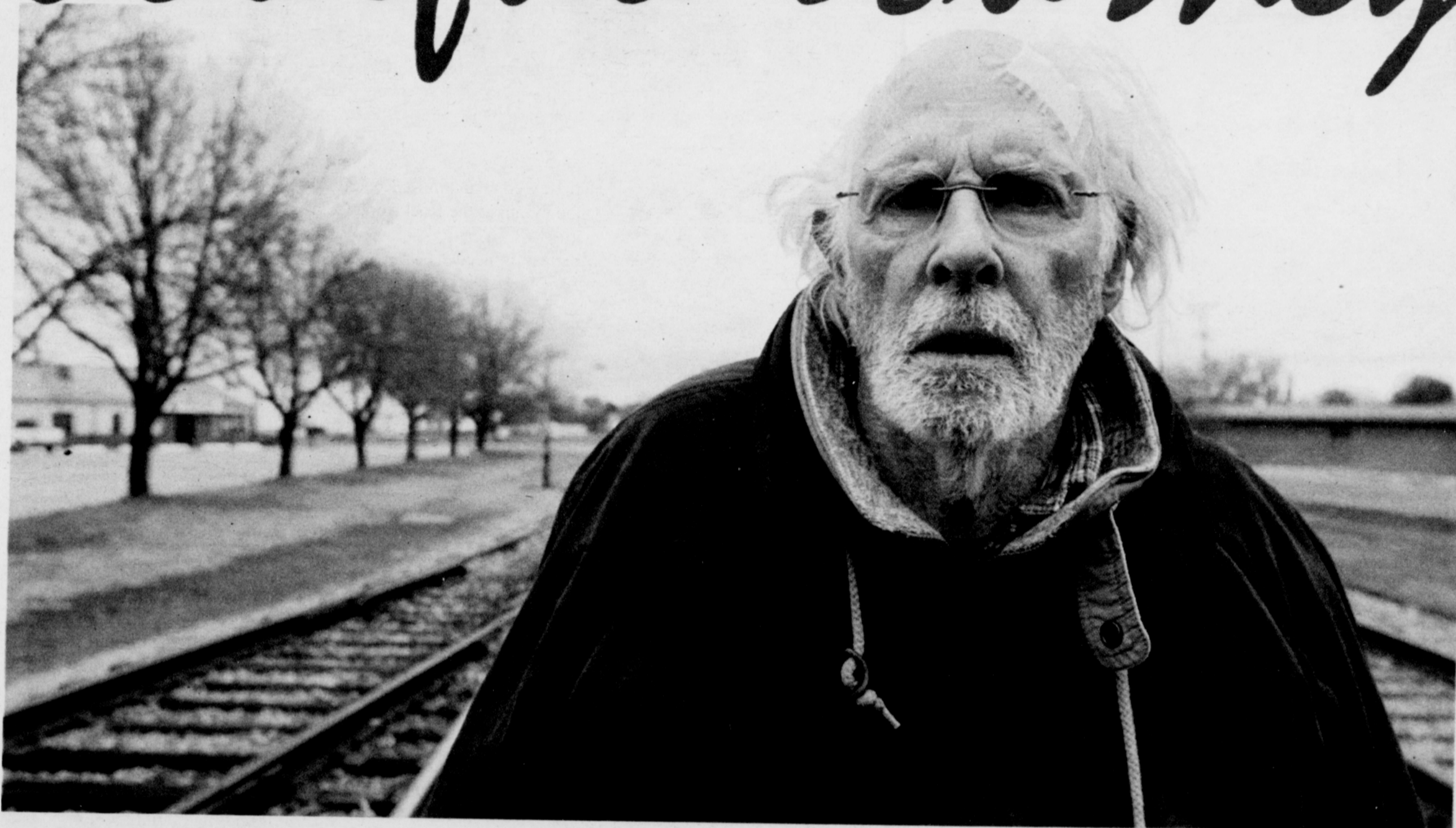




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Soulful Journey



Bruce Dern stars in the new film "Nebraska" playing 'Woody' a cantankerous old man who suddenly springs forth a fearsome determination in life. PHOTO COURTESY PARAMOUNT PICTURES

'Nebraska' uncovers a father and son's humanity

OPINIONATED JUDGE

BY JUDGE DARLEEN ORTEGA



I couldn't help thinking after watching Alexander Payne's new film "Nebraska" of how different its picture of America is from the one that is peddled to us (and to people around the world) in most American films and television. In that more typical Hollywood depiction, everyone (except the odd villain or comic relief) is improbably good-looking, their houses are improbably well-appointed and clean, their conversations are improbably expressive, and their problems are readily diagnosed and handily solved. Humorous films about less sparkly people

are not common and usually display an overtly self-conscious, mocking tone (think "Napoleon Dynamite").

"Nebraska" is the antithesis of those films--and, it strikes me, presents an admirably truthful, if rueful, depiction of a significant segment of American culture. It is shot in expansive black and white in an America of open, bleak spaces (Montana, Wyoming, South Dakota, Nebraska), and feels so deeply sunk into those spaces that its setting rises to the level of a character, as in a Coen brothers' film. Its characters look like actual

people you might meet--their clothes and skin are weathered and frayed, and you can see the toll of work and disappointment and resolution. They also talk like people you might meet--which is to say that often what is said isn't particularly insightful or even interesting and what's really going on might as easily be found by listening for what isn't said.

What I loved most is that director Payne and screenwriter Bob Nelson don't condescend to these folks. Small-mindedness and even meanness are often in evidence, and the film is rich with humor but it doesn't make fun. Most everyone is more or less doing what they can, and you can see the remnants of a culture built on the dreams of a post-World War II economy that has not quite panned out; indeed, much of it has disintegrated. This film sinks into the bleakness,

invites you to look long and listen deeply, and finds beauty and humanity there.

Much of the credit goes to Bruce Dern's career-capping performance as Woody, a taciturn old goat who clearly hasn't shown an interest in much of anything except alcohol and old grievances for as long as anyone can remember. Woody has sprung a fearsome determination to travel from his home in Billings, Mont. to Lincoln, Neb. to collect the million dollars promised to him by a junk mail scam, even if it means he has to walk there. His wife Kate (who has clearly been nursing her exasperation with him for several decades) calls their sons to complain and to retrieve Woody when he wanders off toward Lincoln. One senses she wants them to hear her dub him a "dumb cluck" who, if he wanted

continued ▼ on page 14