

Of Oscars and Guilt

Labor Day '91 saw me at the screening of *Dances with Wolves* at a theater near my home. I was looking forward to it for 2 major reasons. Firstly, I hadn't seen a "real" movie in a long time. My eight-year-old daughter has made me a regular watcher of movies such as *White Fang* (a dog-wolf named by Alaskan Indians), *Dalmatians* (all 101 of them, who had no fire trucks to ride on) and *Milo and Otis* (a cat and dog saga). If I may digress, Corporate Walt Disney's love of money far exceeds the late Mr. Walt Disney's reported love for children. You see, Disney Inc. does not release most of their movies for video rentals so that they can have children extort from their parents every possible dollar for Disney's labor of love. Coming to the second reason, I had heard that this Wolf movie was so good that it had won not only every possible Oscar but also made the Academy create a new category in its honor: "Best Pediatric Dental Care Provided A Leading Man".

I must advise the prospective patron to get the popcorn about 45 minutes into this movie which opens with bloody war scenes of the Civil War vintage! When you go to get the munchies, take along the latest Sunday NY Times book review section. Don't worry about missing anything back in the theater; the movie moves as fast as molasses in winter. Besides, when is the last time you enjoyed dialogue in a movie with subtitles (I thought the Academy did not give the "Best Movie" Oscar to a foreign film). This is basically a "Tarzan" movie with all the familiar ingredients, played out on the prairie plains of 19th century USA. One paleface Yankee war hero, a foreigner of sorts in the Midwest, single handedly saves the "good" natives from (1) "bad" neighbors with bad hair cuts, and (2) other not so enlightened members of his own race - they kill buffaloes for fun. Come on, give me a break!

Hollywood will definitely argue that my characterization is unfair. I must admit they have a point. In this movie "Jane" comes to the "foreign" land before "Tarzan". When she was a little girl, she had escaped the murdering ravages of those bad guys with bad haircuts and was raised by the "good" natives in their warm teepees with clean thoughts. As she passionately kisses our Lord of the Prairie for the first time, she confesses that she is still mourning her late husband. That was the only moment of redemption for this movie: Passion, after all, should any day-overcome grief. By the way, it was also the funniest part of the movie. But going to see this movie for its humor is like electing a Republican president to balance the national budget.

This movie provides grounds for at least two lawsuits. Firstly, like Herman Hesse's famous book *Steppenwolf*, the movie has little to do with wolves. Secondly, the South ought to be upset about the portrayal of their marksmanship: Reminded me of Orwell's real-life story "Homage to Catalonia", where he tells of his enemies' aim (or

lack of it) that saved his life during the Spanish Civil war. In the opening minutes of this movie, about one hundred Rebels firing repeatedly from almost point blank range manage only to hit the celestial Yankee's slow moving and unlucky horse. The message to the South is clear: Once you lose the 'Big One', it is over for ever!

To be successful, you need a "theme". Remember Star Trek - every week the dashing Captain of the Enterprise visited a new planet in deadly peril, and yes, for the lovelorn space traveler or the unlucky on earth, with a beautiful alien woman madly in love with the Captain. Many may think that his "formula" was invented by Hollywood. Wrong! It was the Russian writers of the Cold War era, who proved in the 1960s that even the Nobel Prize Committee is a sucker for such "theme" show. First Boris Pasternak writes Dr. Zhivago - all about human dignity and price of dissent in a totalitarian society. The Committee immediately bestows upon him the Prize. Then, came Alexander Solzhenitsyn, with a few other Russians in between, all writing about the same thing and getting the same Prize. And, we complain about commercial TV! Returning from the Detour and back to the movies, Hollywood's theme for wealth and fame is to bring to justice, in living color, doers of great wrongs of yesteryear. Not only has this movie made googols of money for its participants, it also sets (or, at least, tries extremely hard to set) the nations' conscience at ease (remember all those Oscars). Thank you, Hollywood, for this "Prozac" spritzer. What a deal! A therapist will most probably cost you hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars. Tinsel town does the same for \$7.80 popcorn and taxes, included. Now, I, like others who have seen the movie, should sleep restfully at night (or day, thanks to the recession/budget cuts) knowing that, finally, those responsible for almost wiping out a civilization have been tried, found guilty of ignorance and sentenced to self-education. What is next in the celluloid pipeline: American Portrait: Dances with Russian Bear, From Kennebunkport to Kremlin: No More Kommies, Education: Should Universities Get Involved?

Finally, you all would like to know my recommendation, of course. Let me put it this way. See it, you romantic fool. For me, it was a tossup. While I was inside, it rained after all those dog days of summer. I missed the joyous "Singing of Trees".

Sri Melethil