

Letters on art and culture

15 April 2008

The following is a selection of letters sent to the World Socialist Web Site on art and culture.

On "Richard Widmark (1914-2008)"

Excellent review. A Cold War film of Widmark's that I like is *The Bedford Incident*, with Sidney Poitier. Filmed in 1965, it's shot in black and white and has an earlier feel to it. Yes, the giants are dead/dying, or better yet, their stature grows given the current reigning homunculi. I loved his comment about *Forrest Gump*, whose author is a big Republican/Bush supporter and defender of the war. "Hymn to stupidity," he said. Perfect.

RM

8 April 2008

Hiram Lee has written a very affirmative obituary. But he has left one very important film out which appeared in the 1970s—Robert Aldrich's *Twilight's Last Gleaming* (1977). Made by a director who was very much a product of New Deal culture and often aided blacklisted family members from starvation (see Jean Rouverol's 2000 memoir *Refugees from Hollywood*), and co-starring Burt Lancaster, Widmark appears as a veiled version of General Curtis LeMay. It is the only American film that attempted to understand the political implications of the Vietnam War and tell them to an American public that "did not want to know" in the words of Richard Jaeckel's Major Townes. Not surprisingly, it failed at the box office and remains unavailable on DVD today. As General MacKenzie, Widmark plays the political nemesis to Lancaster's naive hero General Dell and seeks his destruction (as well as that of America) throughout the course of the film. After his goal is achieved, the final image is a long shot of Dell switching off the television monitor and lowering his head as if finally realizing what his complicity with militaristic patriotism actually involves. It is a great moment in a neglected film, as much a testimony to Robert Aldrich's achievements as it is to Widmark's nuanced acting abilities.

TW

8 April 2008

On "Stop-Loss: A serious and moving effort, but what

about that three-letter word?"

On the day *Stop-Loss* arrived in Lawrence, Kansas, I attended the matinee. Like many seniors I save money by attending movies in the afternoon.

At this showing a remarkable thing happened. When the main character, upon learning that *Stop-Loss* was forcing him back to Iraq and that it was the President's orders, shouted, "Fuck the president..." With those words the audience in the movie theater irrupted in applause—the first time I'd heard applause at a movie in over 35 years.

JG

Lawrence, Kansas, USA

9 April 2008

I was astounded to learn of your opinion on the movie *Stop-Loss*, particularly your assertion that the movie offered if only in part an antiwar perspective.

I saw *Stop-Loss* on opening night with a friend who is planning on enlisting for the Marines. While he felt that the battle trauma and personal hardships experienced by soldiers in the film provided a telling account, by the end of the showing I sensed that, far from protesting the war in Iraq, co-writer and director Kimberly Pierce had made a pro-US military propaganda film.

My reasoning stems from the movie's focus, which is on the home life of soldiers. While I do not doubt that the movie gave its viewers an accurate portrayal of the hardships faced by soldiers who return from the Middle East, or who are in limbo between tours of duty, it is my opinion that by targeting the substance of *Stop-Loss* toward these individual-based conflicts alone, the potentially wider antiwar message was not only lost, but completely reversed. Indeed, by allowing the broader context of soldiers' distress—including the moral implications of fighting an illegitimate and illegal war—to go largely undiscussed, Pierce (whether consciously or inadvertently) gives credence to the US military's method of dismissing the mental trauma of soldiers as the result of mere personal issues. What I am attempting to elucidate is that the reason why these personal issues exist in the first place is because soldiers are made to fight for a cause of

which they know nothing and in an environment that is gruesome and debilitating. Hence, I see Pierce's failure in the fact that she never did get to the root of the problem, which is the war itself. Stop-loss orders and personal troubles only exist as resultant circumstances because of the war.

The scene where Sgt. Brandon King violently responds to some street thugs gave especial support to this concept. While an audience may view Brandon's reaction (which includes lining up the three thieves and shooting at least one of them) to being beaten by the thugs as understandable, it had the effect of reinforcing Hollywood's already entrenched notion that returned soldiers are dangers to society that should be feared. Again, instead of exploring why Brandon might exhibit such behavior, which of course came off more as an obvious artistic choice than a reality, Pierce only indicts the soldier for his own reckless conduct, and not the military or US government itself.

There are numerous other examples of such portrayals, including the meeting between Brandon and the man who is supposed to smuggle Brandon across the Canadian border. Not only was that man shown to be nasty and unconcerned with the fate of Brandon or any soldier, but a larger irony was at play: according to an article posted on the WSWs, the Canadian courts have refused to grant amnesty to US soldiers who have gone AWOL, or refused to serve another tour of duty.

With all of this in mind, I cannot draw your conclusions concerning the movie's purpose or its ending, which I felt was intended to demean Brandon's entire struggle not as a statement of antiwar, but of the supposedly inevitable triumph of US militarism. Thus, I believe you have given too much credit to a film that in totality, upholds the official line concerning the war in Iraq.

FM

Washington, DC, USA

9 April 2008

On "Inside and outside the family: Alice Munro's short stories"

I am thoroughly impressed by your review of Munro's book. I particularly enjoyed the color and eloquence with which you write. I wonder, have you ever written a book yourself? At any rate, I will be looking up this book and I'm sure I will enjoy it—if just to see if I take from it the same feelings you did. Keep up the good work. We all need a bit more of your kind of coherence.

SB

9 April 2008

On "Adding Machine: Musical version of a 1920s play reverberates in the 21st century"

Thanks for your review of a musical version of Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine*. I read the play in the early 1960s when I was a Goldwater Republican. Mr. Rice's play probably started my journey to Trotskyism in the 21st century. Mr. Daniels's criticism, appreciation and analysis of the play, the musical and Mr. Rice's life were useful to me. It also shows that the WSWs keeps faith with the tradition that says that workers need both bread and roses. Well done, Mr. Daniels and WSWs. Thank you,

LL

12 April 2008

On "Actor Jack Lemmon dead at 76: something essential about postwar America"

I was particularly impressed by your balanced, nuanced look at Jack Lemmon's work. In it I think that you have raised WSWs to a new, higher level of descriptive and analytical treatment of individuals and events. WSWs seemed to have had a tendency to denigrate people who did not espouse a radical leftist outlook and call for revolutionary change. Your approach is that of a mature, reality-orientated observer of the social scene and who sees the need for putting *capitalisme sauvage* behind us, but understands the value of a perspective and a body of work that at least alludes to the egregious failures and human costs of American capitalism.

RLB

Bradenton, Florida, USA

8 April 2008



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