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'Quintet' Is No 'Sleeper'

By John L. Wasserman

It's difficult to be derisive of a proven artist when he takes a chance and fails, but Robert Altman is rather too helpful with his new film, "Quintet," which opened yesterday at the Metro II, Serramonte 6 and Egyptian.

Altman's recent pictures, "Buffalo Bill and the Indians" (1976) and "Three Women" (1977), have been murky and pretentious in comparison with the earlier "M*A*S*H" and "McCabe and Mrs. Miller" but, with "Quintet," he hits bottom. The film is at first visually striking and intriguing (read: perplexing), but after an hour or so, it becomes apparent that there's no there there. "Quintet" is your basic personal vision film, and it's cross-eyed.

Paul Newman (without whose marquee value the picture would be a dead duck) stars in a story set at some future time when the earth is in an ice-age and its population has been reduced, apparently, to about 50 people. He and his pregnant wife (Brigitte Fossey) have left some unseen seal-hunting grounds (even the seals are dead ducks) and arrived at a former metropolis where the only realities are snow, ice, steam, strange sounds and a game called "quintet." Quintet is played on a board, with dice and pieces, and the motivation to win is strong, since the loser is murdered and devoured by packs of ravenous dogs.

Vittorio Gassman is a good-evil character named St. Christopher (ah, the irony of it all), Fernando Rey is the Last Referee and Bibi Andersson (who becomes Newman's best friend after Fossey is killed by a mysterious bomb), Nina Van Pallandt and David Langton round out the United Nations of major characters. I can't recall now what happens toward the end, for my mind went to sleep long before my eyes closed. Basically, though, most everybody expires after concluding that good is preferable to evil, honesty to dishonesty, integrity to treachery, art to sham and life to death.

If you already know that, you are going to have to



Paul Newman: Marquee value

be content with the apocalyptic setting contrived by Altman with the assistance of production designer Leon Ericksen and art director Wolf Kroeger. As I said, it is an arresting visual experience.

I'm not sure, however, that Woody Allen's "Sleeper," albeit set several million years earlier than "Quintet," isn't more profound.