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SOHO ARTS



Diana Church

Soapbox Apocalypse: The Gleam in Robert Aldrich's Eye

Hot rhetoric from Hollywood's Last Angry Man: Vietnam was staged as a "theatrical holocaust"; These are the last days to level with the American people; "Nobody lives forever."

Tom Allen

Twilight's Last Gleaming, an enraged, inflammatory potboiler, thrusts itself on Jimmy Carter's honeymoon of trust like a slap from a betrayed suitor. Starting today, this unique new movie will be pitching the hot rhetoric of soapbox demagogery against the soothing cool of two decades of government lies. The director, Robert Aldrich, Hollywood's last authentic angry man, is appealing to the worst suspicions of the man in the street against the credibility of the U.S. government.

Twilight's Last Gleaming is the rarest of contemporary American films. It is both topical and angry. Outfitted as an action caper and political thriller and using the language of melodramatic suspense, it's a desperate plea to the government to begin telling the truth about Vietnam and about the real power structures in America.

The film is a rabble-rousing tirade conceived for the era of nuclear checkmate and limited warfare. It both accuses the Kissinger regime and the National Security Council of staging Vietnam as a "theatrical holocaust...to prove we were capable of inhuman acts" and presupposes pessimistically that the permanent, standing government ("the real power" as the ads say) would just as soon assassinate the President as let the truth be revealed.

The immediate, melodramatic topicality of *Twilight's Last Gleaming* is channeled into a contemporary "J'accuse" that is engineered to demand a response in the

popular movie pits wherever the film is shown. By comparison, the political potboilers of the '60s like *Seven Days in May* and *Fail Safe* with their "correct" liberal attitudes titillated our fears or, like *Dr. Strangelove*, appealed to sardonic dancing on the grave.

Aldrich's film, however, is more of a forceful, primitive purgative. It has nothing to do with the chic paranoia and liberal reflexes of such recent films as *The Parallax View*, *Three Days of the Condor* and the ending of *All the President's Men* which suspected the worst of an unnamed "them" with a cool, distanced intellect. Aldrich prominently displays the C.I.A., the military establishment and the state department and sounds an almost seditious rallying cry against their secret manipulations.

Robert Aldrich simply does not make "Medium Cool," balanced diatribes for intellectuals. He has allied himself

Continued on next page



Familiar actors—the face of government



Widmark as "MacKenzie"

Continued from previous page

with a disenchanted, blue-collar counterculture. It's a lonely, not very respectable position; and in American filmmaking, Aldrich's only topical peer has been Tom Laughlin-Billy Jack's brand of societal bathos which has dared to use such forbidden screen words as "Nelson Rockefeller" and "Spiro Agnew." In American writing, Aldrich comes closest to that vigorous investigative reporting and alarmist bear-baiting that draws attention in the flesh magazines.

Twilight's Last Gleaming is pushy, polemical, and verbose. As a film, it's a middlebrow, fictional counterpart to *Hearts and Minds*. But this movie will not be confined to the art-house route. *Twilight's Last Gleaming* is being launched in *King Kong's* wake throughout the country to mix it up with the masses, and there should be no better political barometer in the immediate future than this film's box office as to whether the American public has begun to trust or still doubts its government.

Aldrich says that the movie has to be seen in ghettos, ethnic neighborhoods and Sun Belt drive-ins to understand how it really works, not in Manhattan screening rooms.

He's right.

The Movie

The kicker in the plot of *Twilight's Last Gleaming* is the final terrorist demand of a rogue general who has seized control of a Titan missile base. He coerces the President of the United States under the threat of World War III to reveal the truth about Vietnam, Limited War II. It's a turn of events that can't be found in Walter Wager's serviceable, smartass suspense novel *Viper Three*, which was the inspiration for the film.

Aldrich waded through the adaptations of more than

ten screenwriters, including the scenarists of record, Ronald M. Cohen and Edward Huebsch, in order to tag on this new plot twist. It's the force that gives the film its sense of urgent topicality as well as the force that ultimately drags the film beyond the safety of buttoned-down action suspense and into the simplistic realms of bromide, caricature and hysterical jeremiad.

Wager, nevertheless, had a good thing going for thriller fans in his tale about a mysteriously busted SAC general and a band of fellow convicts who successfully invade a missile base and who mug the government into supplying ransom money and passage to a foreign country in Air Force 1 with the President as a hostage. The novelist copped out with a bland ending in which the convicts capitulated to the awe of the imperial Presidency, but not before he had planted the suggestion of a catastrophe spectacular within the format of an action caper. Like *Fail Safe*, the novel was a classic, contemporary suspense tale about turning America's technology of better nuclear mouse traps against itself.

Aldrich is right at home with adventure heroics when it suits his purpose. His seven-million dollar Bavaria-Lorimar presentation, which was funded partially by an American TV company and mostly by German tax support, speeds slickly through the *Juggernaut* frissons of defusing hair-trigger booby traps; and action seekers are even more surely hooked by the caper elan of a Dirty Quartet invading a military bastion.

Aldrich has built himself a truly plush playground in the midst of the Bavarian foothills. His reconstruction of a U.S.A.F. missile base and of other artifacts like the Oval Office rival in the imagination those fabled outposts of Americana that the KGB are supposed to have nestled in the Urals. The sets, especially the war rooms and the simulation of rockets on the verge of a final countdown, are the kind of tools of the trade that separate the convincing thrillers from the tinker-toy cheapies.

And then, there's the kicker. Aldrich's compulsion to divert the novel into a topical denunciation has reshaped the book's fictional characters into argumentative weapons. They are, however, all still males; and Aldrich is the nonpareil director of masculine camaraderie as surely as George Cukor is the nonpareil director of feminine yearnings; but they are now males with a message.

The Cast

Burt Lancaster plays Lawrence Dell, an Air Force general who has been radicalized against the Vietnam war by his POW imprisonment. For the sake of the message, he delivers one too many libertarian, pacifist tirades, especially during the anti-climactic moments of the story. Worse yet, for the sake of the melodrama, he delivers one too many personality changes. He is portrayed at once as cool, suave and brilliant in seizing the missile base as well as flustered and naive when it comes to counterpointing the virulence of the military establishment stacked against him.

That's one of the problems in *Twilight's Last Gleaming* for sophisticates. The characters in a crunch tend to flipflop their personalities so that there is always one dominant and one weak character in conflict. Aldrich's



A President (Durning) in the hands of terrorists

perennial gameplan has been to sustain a crisis level in his plots whether integral or gerrymandered into the story. His films tend to satisfy most according to the tightness of their context, but *Twilight's Last Gleaming* loosens in its probing of several tentative endings. The extended, intermittent debates towards the end of the film begin to run the message into the ground.

Burt Lancaster himself is another problem for sophisticates, especially those who feel patronizing toward the genre film. The brawny, seriocomic, former acrobat with the echo-chamber haw-haw-haw has played the star, the buffoon and the swashbuckler at various points in his career; but he has also collaborated vigorously in film production and helped float as many entertaining social message films as any actor on this A.C.L.U. side of John Wayne. He has been running non-stop in his early sixties through his own co-direction and co-screenwriting (*The Midnight Man*), through Bertolucci's 1900, through Visconti films, and through a marathon Italian television Biblical epic called *Moses*. But he is never likely to be mistaken for a Hollywood establishment figure like Charlton Heston. By one of those quirks of distribution, Lancaster is even opening in a second film today, *The Cassandra Crossing*, in which he not only reverses roles by playing a military heavy, but he also borrows the name *Mackenzie*, pronounced the same as that of the top-brass villain in *Twilight's Last Gleaming*.

Despite the honors deserved by ambitious reaching, Burt Lancaster is still, haw-haw-haw, Burt Lancaster. Aldrich, luckily, is a director who knows how to use the Lancaster range both in the actor's raised-beetle-brow sincerity, in which he reads lines like a peasant finally nailing a difficult phrasing into place, and in the wearied dignity of the athlete's face in repose, which is the stance that Visconti put to such good use in *The Leopard*. Lancaster and Aldrich are almost playful in *Twilight's Last Gleaming*. For the nightclub mimics, they even plant the hearty haw-haw-haw guffaw set to windmilling hands; and for virtually the first time on screen, especially in the scene of defusing a poison gas, Lancaster breaks through his trademark of a queerly archaic, old-world delivery to lapse into colloquial obscenities. These kinds of things happen to male actors in an Aldrich film.

Lancaster is matched in *Twilight's Last Gleaming* by Charles Durning's interpretation of a United States President in the year 1981. He plays a pol of the old city wards, and like the Lancaster character, he has to lapse from shrewdness to naivete according to the demands of the melodrama. President Dave Stevens is a patronizing, ebullient, liberal team member whom events force into a confrontation with the naked face of the standing government in his Security Council, a ring of menacing grey eminences that Aldrich has iconographically stocked with the likes of Joseph Cotten, Melvyn Douglas, Leif Erickson, and Charles McGraw.

The chief narrative flaw in *Twilight's Last Gleaming* is the ambivalent role of the floating SAC general in the field, Martin MacKenzie, played by Richard Widmark in a weathered, hoary death mask. The film has beefed up his part into a personal macho vendetta against Lancaster's Dell; but when MacKenzie commits the chief, unpardonable outrage in the film, the movie never reveals whether he is an independent nut or whether he is plugged into orders from the standing government. The film also remains open-ended about whether the public is going to be levelled with by a secret government that has been chastened by its own brand of nuclear blackmail. That's not the trouble. It would have been a much better film with just the ambiguity and not the final outrage.

Beyond Widmark's hatchet man, however, lies the real acting tools in Aldrich's arsenal—the pug uglies who connect like *Rocky* uppercuts with the intended proletarian audience. One actor is even a *Rocky* alumnus: Burt Young, who has been softened from the novel's Mafia hit man into a blue-collar punk who never fails to rivet talk of nuclear power and millions of dollars down to his gut fears and belly rumbles. Alongside Young as one of the convicts, Paul Winfield craftily grows into a streetwise, embittered black Vietnam veteran, and he gives voice to the cynicism of America's racial minorities.

Perhaps the most remarkable foot soldier is Gerald S. O'Loughlin who transforms a clowning routine as the President's aide-de-camp into a wringing, sweaty, daring

tour de force of badgering rage. He nails down an utterly human, common touch in a blizzard of obscenities outside the Oval Office. In a humble way, O'Loughlin is one of the awesome vehicles that are going to rush this film beyond the reach of the guardians of print and into the laps of downhome America.

Issues and Answers

Robert Aldrich, loaded down with paradoxes, came to town last week to promote his latest movie. The filmmaker's kindly grandfather image and his relaxed conversational tone contrast strikingly with the fierceness of his recent films and with the progressively acrid cynicism that they project. We met together in his hotel room with a bad tape recorder and with a good photographer.

In appearance and in several career parallels, Aldrich has most resembled Robert Wise, the dean of America's mogul directors. Both worked their way up through the ranks of RKO, both hit it big in the '60s after a few cult successes (Wise's *The Sound of Music* and Aldrich's *The Dirty Dozen*), both experimented with owning their own studios and production equipment, and both in the '70s have been presidents of the Directors Guild of America. The big difference is that Aldrich has kept his energies charged in the '70s in his best, most personal films while Wise, along with most of his age group, has been floundering about in search of past formulas. Aldrich has had his box-office flops, but there has never been a doubt about the identity of his films.

Robert Aldrich is a masterful choice as the current president of the Directors Guild. His union is presently at war over the demands of the Writers Guild for more possessive screen credits. More than any other consistently active American director, Aldrich has been making unmistakably personal films; yet, among his peers, he seems to be the least interested director in claiming possessive credits. He doesn't see any point to credits like "by Robert Aldrich" or "A Robert Aldrich Film," and he hasn't even claimed screenwriting credit for one-tenth of his consistent input into film scripts. So humble Robert is the ideal guy to stick it to the screenwriters, the glamorous peons of the screen world, who are demanding more possessive credits from a director's medium.

Robert Aldrich didn't pull the trigger on the gun directed at Burt Reynolds' head at the end of *The Longest Yard* (1974); but in *Hustle* (1975), the story of a victimless crime that evolved into an indictment of society, he portrayed an America in the absolute control of corrupt manipulators, and in *Twilight's Last Gleaming* he postulates the existence of a secret standing government which operates above the law of a deceived public. Is Aldrich becoming hopelessly pessimistic about America?

The director smiles affably (infuriatingly) and thinks. Not necessarily so. In person, Aldrich isn't an alarmist who rants and raves and runs to a closet for documents. He doesn't think that he is putting on the screen any material not already well known to the readers of *The Pentagon Papers*, the Watergate transcripts and the daily newspapers. He does mention the 1958 publication of Henry Kissinger's and Lucius Clay's treatises on a superpower's behavior in an era of limited, non-nuclear warfare, two works which rationalize the exercise of the same type of national terrorism that is alleged in *Twilight's Last Gleaming*; but Aldrich doesn't think it is necessary to find a specific edition of the minutes of the National Security Council in order to prove the validity of the allegations in his latest film. He takes his suppositions for granted as the suspicions of a reasonable man. *Twilight's Last Gleaming* was not designed to coincide with Carter's administration; but was conceived at a time when Aldrich's suspicions refused to be lulled by the placidity and jolly sunniness of the Gerald Ford regency; and so we drop the topic and drift off among other paranoid ruminations into speculation as to who really shot down Ted Sorensen's nomination to the C.I.A.

Did Aldrich sanction institutionalized assassination in *Hustle* when the detective hero covers up the killing of a Mafia fixer by disguising it as a self-defense and does *Twilight's Last Gleaming* celebrate bloody terrorism in behalf of a good cause?

The director smiles affably (infuriatingly) and won't be drawn in. He believes there's plenty of public evidence around to justify the strong stuff in his recent films. I can't help but comment that it is not that I detect a new, radicalized attitude in the tone of his films; it's just that he has never previously come out swinging at such prominent, wide-ranging, societal targets.

Did the radically new type of financing behind *Twilight's Last Gleaming* influence the shaping of the film in any way?

Absolutely not. *Twilight's Last Gleaming* went into production just as the American brand of tax-shelter films engineered by Persky-Bright (*The Last Detail*, *Shampoo*, *Taxi Driver*, etc.) was being rescinded by the U.S. Congress. The German government, on the other hand, was just beginning to explore the same route and put up two-thirds of the funding of the expensive German-American production at a time when they only knew the plot outline in Wager's novel and not the undetermined, controversial Aldrich ending. Now, *Twilight's Last Gleaming* is probably going to be a popular hit, but no one

knows how much flak and cries of "sedition" and "dirty muckraking" will arise from the film's public reception. The Germans and Aldrich have reasons to be anxiously curious; but you have to admit that the idea of a Washington, D.C. world premiere for the film set for February 6 is brilliant. *Twilight's Last Gleaming* ought to be the most popular film at the Kennedy Center since *State of Siege*. Considering the evocation of Dallas at the end of the film, it ought to be the most tasteless choice also. The people's servants in the capital who were so righteously shocked by the very possibility of a corrupt senator in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* will be even more deliciously frazzled by a film that proclaims them as pawns in the grip of a secretive, permanent power structure. (On a more serious note, as a businessman survivor of two topsy-turvy decades of American filmmaking, Aldrich is angry that films are one of the few expensive businesses deprived of tax incentives in America.)

Aldrich exercised total creative control in *Twilight's Last Gleaming*, and the screen evidence inexorably bears this out. Everytime the film trampled on my sense of concise dramatic construction and my fondness for discreet exposition, I groaned with delight. I have been jostled through that same old melodramatic maelstrom through two decades of Aldrich films, and I look forward to many more years of the same outrageous excesses. But if Aldrich should formulate any more trim, taut masterworks like *Ulzana's Raid*, that's even better.

Speaking about victims of the black list, was the Charles Durning line "Everybody dies" in *Twilight's Last Gleaming* a planted reference to Aldrich's involvement in the making of *Body and Soul*?

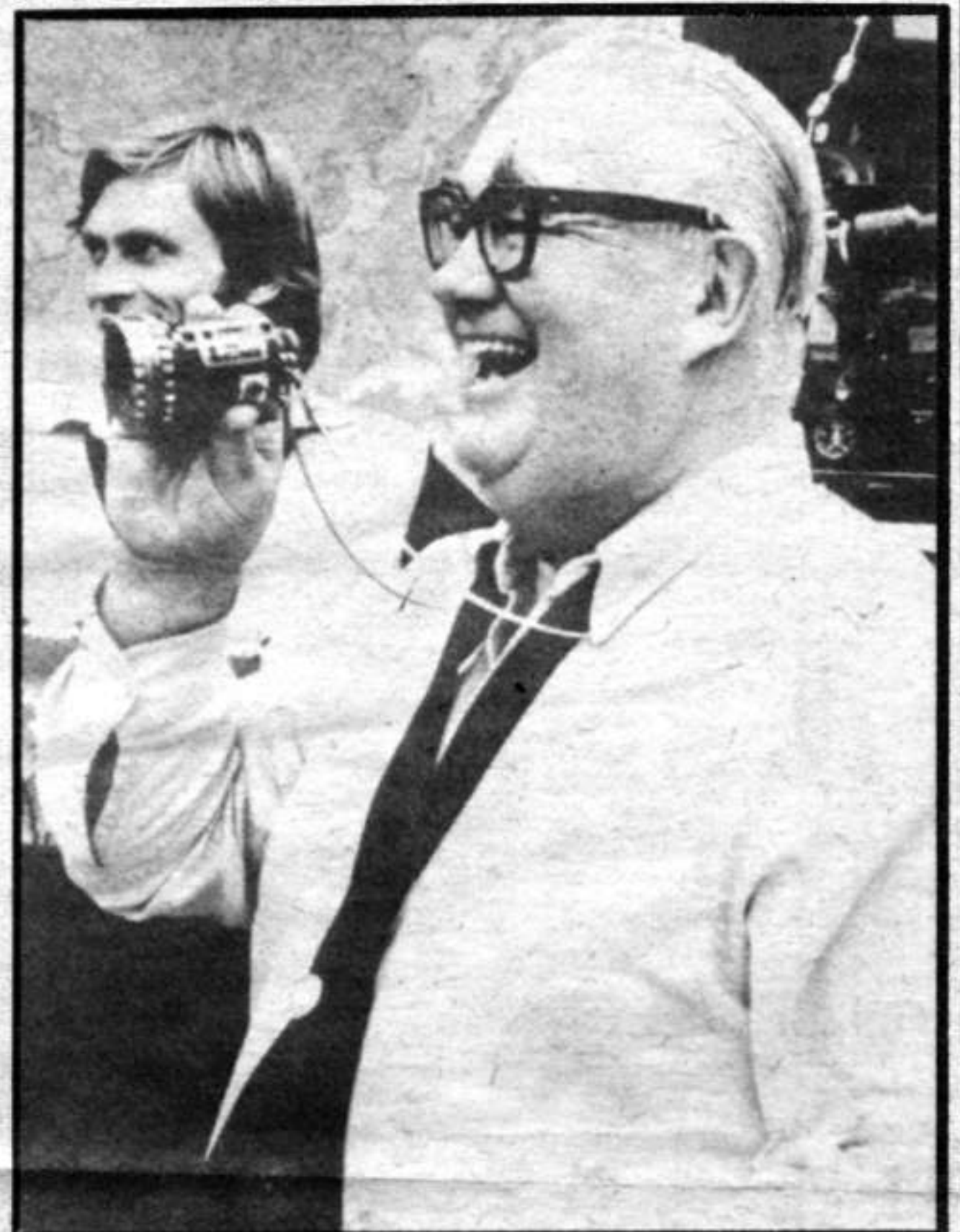
Yep. Aldrich has nothing but the fondest memories of his breaking into the business with the subsequently harassed Abe Polonsky and Robert Rossen; and for that matter, in what must be the most elite apprenticeship in film history, Aldrich can cite jobs as assistant to Jean Renoir, William Wellman, Fred Zinnemann, Albert Lewin, Lewis Milestone, Joseph Losey and Charles Chaplin before directing his own first film.

So what's the next film?

An adaptation of Joseph Wambaugh's *The Choirboys* for Lorimar Productions. The rumor vine in the trades is already rippling with the news of Aldrich's distaste for Wambaugh's draft of the novel in screenplay form. Aldrich hasn't minced words on issues all morning; but a few personalities, including Wambaugh, have rated "no comment." Aldrich does claim that Wambaugh's view of American society as perceived from the underbelly of law enforcement is even darker than his. That's neither comforting nor yet to be proved. The director of *Hustle* and the writer of the Walpurgian *The Choirboys* seem made for each other.

Robert Aldrich—A Selective Filmography Dire Titles, A Darkling Vision

1954	The World For Ransom
1955	Kiss Me Deadly
1955	The Big Knife
1956	Attack
1958	Ten Seconds to Hell
1961	The Last Sunset
1962	Sodom and Gomorrah
1962	What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?
1967	The Dirty Dozen
1970	Too Late the Hero
1971	The Grissom Gang
1972	Ulzana's Raid
1973	The Emperor of the North (Pole)
1974	The Longest Yard
1975	Hustle
1977	Twilight's Last Gleaming



• Aldrich on location in Germany



O'Loughlin, colloquial blizzards