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Dartmouth Film Society

THE MEMBER OF THE WEDDING (1953)

Frankie Addams	JULIE HARRIS
Berenice Sadie Brown	ETHEL WATERS
John Henry	BRANDON de WILDE
Jarvis	ARTHUR FRANZ
Janice	NANCY GATES
Mr. Addams	WILLIAM HANSEN
Honey Camden Brown	JAMES EDWARDS
T. T. Williams	HARRY BOLDEN
Soldier	DICK MOORE
Barney MacKean	DANNY MUMMERT

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Screenplay: EDNA and EDWARD ANHALT, based on the book and play by CARSON McCULLERS. Photography (with the Farutso Balanced Lens): HAL MOHR. Editorial Supervision: HARRY GERSTAD. Editing: WILLIAM LYON. Production Design: RUDOLPH STERNAD. Art Direction: CARY ODELL. Music: ALEX NORTH. Associate Producers: EDNA and EDWARD ANHALT. Produced by the STANLEY KRAMER COMPANY for COLUMBIA PICTURES. Released February, 1953.

Directed by FRED ZINNEMANN

There is no story in the usual sense. The theme is human isolation and the need to identify with something, the form, a fugue for three voices. The three interlocked characters are seen in the crucial summer of their lives. Frankie is a motherless, fiercely lonely 12-year-old tomboy, caught between childhood and adolescence and fighting them both. Berenice, the Negro cook who looks after her, is a woman just past her prime; the one man she really loved has died, but she is still going strong. Owlsh little John Henry is Frankie's 6-year-old cousin and playmate--her whipping-boy and her only friend. The setting is an old house in a small Southern town.

What happens in this summer? These three who cling together for solace and human companionship are torn apart. Frankie, who is outgrowing Berenice's motherliness and John Henry's childish games, longs for new attachments. When her soldier-brother brings home his fiancée, she falls wildly, romantically in love with the idea of the wedding: "The trouble with me is that for a long time I have been just an 'I' person... When Berenice says 'we' she means her lodge and church and colored people. Soldiers can say 'we' and mean the Army. All people belong to a 'we' except me...I know that the bride and my brother are the 'we' of me. So I am going with them...and joining with the wedding...and after that to whatever place they will ever go...I love them so much because they are the 'we' of me." She is, naturally, not welcome on the honeymoon; rebuffed, her delusions shattered, she runs away from home. In a few hours she returns, but in those few hours the others have, by the accidents and perversities of fate, been brutally shattered--Berenice has lost her closest attachment, and John Henry is fatally ill. When the summer is over, Frankie is beginning to find herself in the world of adolescence (a new girl friend who plays Rachmaninoff has a boy friend--it's not so glamorous as a wedding; but Frankie, as confidante, is at last involved).

Miss McCullers has discussed the peculiarities of the material: "THE MEMBER OF THE WEDDING" is unconventional because it is not a literal kind of play. It is an inward play and the conflicts are inward conflicts. The antagonist is not personified, but is a human condition of life; the sense of moral isolation. In this respect THE MEMBER OF THE WEDDING has an affinity with classical plays--which we are not used to in the modern theatre where the protagonist and antagonist are present in palpable conflict on the stage. The play has other abstract values; it is concerned with the weight of time, the hazard of human existence, bolts of chance. The reaction of the characters to these

abstract phenomena projects the movements of the play. Some observers who failed to apprehend this *modus operandi* felt the play to be fragmentary because they did not account for this aesthetic concept."

Miss McCullers had written of her qualms about putting this lyric tragi-comedy on the stage: "The funniness and the grief are often coexistent in a single line and I did not know how an audience would respond to this." Stage audiences responded with delight, and the play ran 62 weeks. The film version opened to a different type of audience: In vast movie palaces people were puzzled and suspicious (it is said that in some towns customers couldn't understand the material and thought Frankie was supposed to be a boy) and rejected the work. Columbia cut a crucial 20-minute section and tossed the movie into the lower half of double bills.

Filmed plays are often subjected to a peculiar kind of criticism: they are attacked for being what they are. The judgment of *TIME* was that "...the film seems to be more play than picture: it comes most vibrantly alive when it forsakes the one-set stage original and, untrammelled by high-flown talk, roves through the neighborhood, e.g., Frankie's journey through blaring, glaring honky-tonk town." The present writer (in the article "Movies, the Desperate Art", in *Modern Writing*, reprinted in Talbot's *FILM: AN ANTHOLOGY*) contended that "the drama...was in the 'high-flown talk,' and the excursion into town was the least dramatically interesting sequence in the film (and, as a matter of fact, the camera moved more fluidly within the room than it did outside)...But critics have been quick to object to a film with a difficult theme, a small camera range, or a markedly verbal content (they object even when the words are worth listening to). Because action can be extended over a wide area on the screen, they think it must be--or what they're seeing isn't really a movie at all. The camera is supposed to get outside, even when it has no place to go...The critics' admiration for 'action' and 'the chase' leads them to praise sleazy suspense films but to fret over whether *A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE* or *THE MEMBER OF THE WEDDING* is really 'cinematic.'" (This position was disputed by Richard Roud in *SIGHT AND SOUND*, Spring 1957.) It's possible to state the case even more strongly: the finest qualities of the film are in its sense of language and in the extraordinary performances. The journey through town, by disrupting this flow of language and by making us aware of a mechanically constructed outside world, is the worst defect in the film. Another but lesser defect is the melodramatic sequence showing Berenice's relatives trying to escape the law. Sequences like these, obviously designed to provide action and to provide something considered necessary for the total structure (a recent example: Laurence Harvey getting his beating near the end of *ROOM AT THE TOP*), fail because the intentions are simply too transparent, and the execution too clumsy. It is enough that Berenice will have no place in Frankie's future life; it is insulting to give us melodrama when we already have drama.

The drama of *THE MEMBER OF THE WEDDING* is internal and it is in the dialogue. Unfortunately, audiences have become so accustomed to the flat, contrived language of the movies that the rare work with beautiful dialogue--*THE MEMBER OF THE WEDDING* or *A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE*--is regarded as having something the matter with it--i.e., really good writing is considered "artificial".

The credits list Ethel Waters above Julie Harris and Brandon De Wilde; but though Miss Waters is little short of magnificent and is certainly a feast for the camera, scrawny, cracked-voice Julie Harris, as the member of the wedding, demonstrates why she is generally regarded as the best young American actress. (She was 24 when she created the role on the stage, 26 in the film version; it was her first film performance, and it was Ethel Waters' best--but a long road from her first, back in 1929 when she sang "Am I Blue" in *ON WITH THE SHOW*.)

Fred Zinnemann, who imparts a fine nervous intensity to the film, directed both *THE MEMBER OF THE WEDDING* and *HIGH NOON* in 1952; in 1953 he won the Academy Award for Best Direction (and Best Production) for *FROM HERE TO ETERNITY*.

--Pauline Kael (1961)

Fred Zinnemann's *FROM HERE TO ETERNITY*, starring Burt Lancaster, Montgomery Clift, Deborah Kerr, Frank Sinatra and Donna Reed will be presented next Monday evening, July 10th, at 8:30 p.m.