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reviews

LITTLE BIG MAN

Gordon Gow sees Arthur Penn mock the western myth . . .

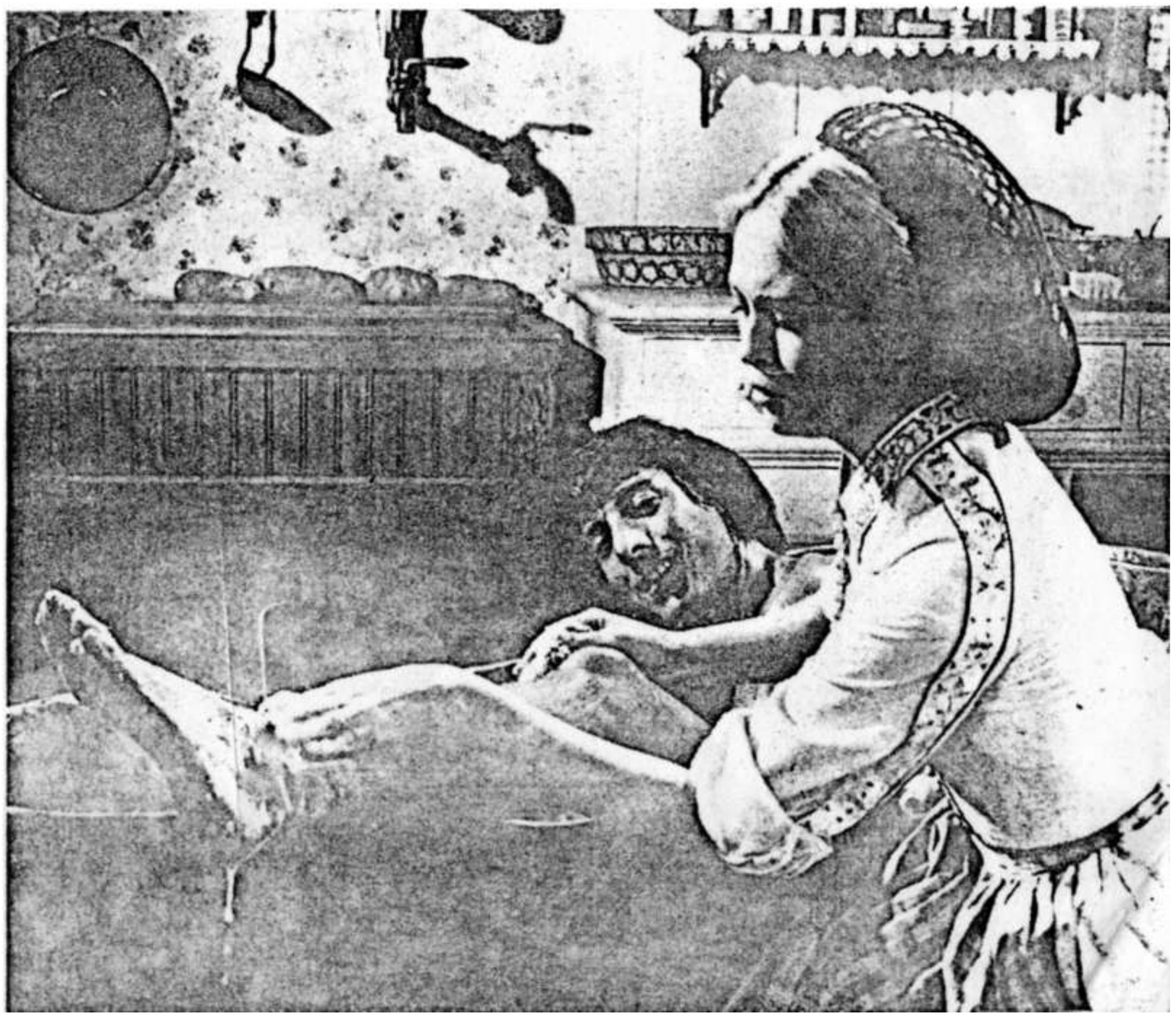
Directed by Arthur Penn. Produced by Stuart Millar. Screenplay by Calder Willingham from the novel of the same name by Thomas Berger. Director of photography, Harry Stradling, Jnr. Editor, Dede Allen. Music, John Hammond. Art director, Anglo Graham. A Stuart Millar/Arthur Penn production distributed by Twentieth Century-Fox. American. Panavision. Technicolor. 139 mins.

Jack Crabb, DUSTIN HOFFMAN; *Mrs. Pendrake*, FAYE DUNAWAY; *Allardyce T. Merriweather*, MARTIN BALSAM; *Gen. George A. Custer*, RICHARD MULLIGAN; *Old Lodge Skins*, CHIEF DAN GEORGE; *Wild Bill Hickok*, JEFF COREY; *Sunshine*, AMY ECCLES; *Olga*, KELLY JEAN PETERS; *Caroline*, CAROLE ANDROSKY; *Little Horse*, ROBERT LITTLE STAR; *Younger Bear*, CAL BELLINI; *Shadow That Comes in Sight*, RUBEN MORENO; *Burns Red in the Sky*, STEVE SHEMAYNE; *Historian*, WILLIAM HICKEY; *Sergeant*, JAMES ANDERSON; *Lieutenant*, JESSE VINT; *Major*, ALAN OPPENHEIMER; *Rev. Silas Pendrake*, THAYER DAVID; *Mr. Kaen*, PHILIP KENNEALLY; *Captain*, JACK BANNON; *Young Jack Crabb*, RAY DIMAS; *Adolescent Jack Crabb*, ALAN HOWARD.

IN THE LONG RUN, the winning thing about *Little Big Man* is its refusal to toe any line. It mocks the Western myth, as Arthur Penn has done before more seriously in *The Left-Handed Gun*. It also has a tendency to gawp at history with something very like awe, while at the same time waxing satirical with a fitful kind of mirth that comes and goes. A screenplay by Calder Willingham is as beneficial as you would expect; and while I am unacquainted with the Thomas Berger novel from which it is derived, I daresay it's a corker. The framework is an interview, conducted by a wide-eyed young historian with a man who is 121 years old (Dustin Hoffman in an ugly mask). Seen only at the beginning and the end, for which we must be thankful, this old boy croaks on and on about how as a child he was raised by Cheyenne Indians after the death of his parents in 1859, and thereafter gravitated between his native white world and that of the Indians, witnessing Custer's last (apparently paranoid) stand at Little Bighorn.

From time to time I felt that Hoffman's old-goatish bleat on the soundtrack would drive me silly, although he does have some funny remarks to mitigate it; and I am not sure that I approve of his performance (without mask) as the kid caught between two worlds, learning of life's paradoxes and pitfalls—isn't he a touch too modern in style? This is not a major problem in such a film, because the Penn approach is mainly irreverent. What I do quite like is the idea of bringing back some characters who have figured in the hero's life and drifted out of our thoughts until suddenly, after a lapse of time, we are shown how the years ring their changes of fortune. This happens several times—notably in the cases of the quaint people depicted so well by Faye Dunaway and Martin Balsam, and some of the Indians too: one is reminded of the diversified encounters in the life of *David Copperfield*.

Much of the action, when it happens, is marvellously spirited, but occasionally in the dialogue passages the compositions for the Panavision frame are humdrum, and generally one tends to want rather more bounce from a Penn film. The highlights are the boy's first sight of what glamorous gunplay can lead to, when Wild Bill Hickok fires fatal shots in a saloon, getting his enemy in both heart and lungs with much blood—and the occasion, during one of the Indian phases, when the Little Big Man is not ungratefully but very wearily obliged to service a number of eager maidens within a single tepee and a single night. It is a pretty raunchy yarn, all told; and if the sentimentality that intrudes gets a little bit soggy, the shifts into comic mockery and even near-burlesque are frequent enough to keep one entertained. I assume that Penn intended to do rather more than that, since he places great stress upon an old Indian (quietly portrayed by Chief Dan George) who lies on the ground waiting for death but is revived by a downpour of rain in a strange little sequence near the end of the film. Somehow, more depth is implied by this occurrence than is established during the course of the story. The prevalent vein is of sophisticated hindsight, informed by disenchantment and affection in variable proportions. Obviously, like any Penn film, it merits attention, but to my mind it doesn't belong among his best. The evasion of any 'category' is, of course, highly commendable. It certainly gets out of the rut.



Dustin Hoffman and Faye Dunaway in Arthur Penn's 'Little Big Man'

*** not to be missed
** highly recommended
* recommended