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ON FILM

Milos Forman:

Adapting a Cult Classic

RICHARD NATALE

Milos Forman has resurfaced. The Czechoslovakian director, whose films—*Loves of a Blonde, Black Peter, Fireman's Ball*—were part of a brief Eastern European cinematic resurgence in the 1960s, has not been heard of in the film world since his first American feature, *Taking Off*.

The occasion of his return is an adaptation of Ken Kesey's cult classic, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, starring the enterprising Jack Nicholson. Whatever the critical reaction, the picture will draw Forman into the spotlight *Cuckoo's Nest*, like Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, Heller's *Catch-22*, Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, and Vonnegut's, *Slaughterhouse Five*, is one of those pivotal novels which defines an era.

In fact, *Cuckoo's* audience may be even larger than those of other cult novels since its acclaimed stage adaptation has become a standard ensemble piece. Thirteen years after the novel's publication, the film version of *Cuckoo's Nest* is bound to arouse curiosity and cause debate anew, and criticism of Forman's interpretation will figure prominently in these discussions.

Though a resident of the U.S. for the past six years, Forman maintains an appearance and demeanor that can best be described as "smart European casual." His ever-present pipe seems as much a natural extension of his personality as George Burns' cigar or Dean Martin's martini glass.

RN: Did you leave Czechoslovakia for political reasons?

MF: No, actually I came to the U.S. because I'd signed a contract with Paramount to do a film here (*Taking Off*, which was eventually released by Universal), I would like to go back, if just to visit my wife and children. I don't know if I'd be allowed to come back, though.

RN: Have you seen your family at all since you left?

MF: No. I just returned from Europe where I spoke to them on the phone. While I was editing *Cuckoo's Nest* in San Francisco, I was promised a visit from my wife. But at the last moment permission was revoked.

RN: Why, as a filmmaker, did you decide to settle in New York instead of Los Angeles?

MF: New York has always had a beautiful mystique to me. For someone living in the middle of Europe, New York is the ultimate city.

RN: Do you still feel that way?

MF: Yes. It's the only place in the world where you can sit at home all the time and never feel you've missed anything. I had visited New York several times as a guest of the New York Film Festival and during a ten day visit I would see maybe twelve stage productions. Now that I live here, if I see twelve plays in six months, I feel I've accomplished something. Once you're here you can easily spend all your life sitting at home. But you know if you want to, you can see anything.

RN: Why did you wait so long between pictures?

MF: I worked on three other film projects after *Taking Off*. One was abandoned—an adaptation of Thomas Berger's *Vital Parts*. I had a terrific time working with Berger and we did some good work. We just never finished it. Another was an original treatment by Paul Zimmerman (former *Newsweek* film critic), which was turned down. The other, also an adaptation, of a mystery story called, 'Witnesses,' I just lost interest in.

RN: Wasn't it difficult adapting a book that is so well known?

MF: Fortunately when I read it, I didn't know this. So I was free of the overexaggerated respect for a piece of material which can blind you. The most important work in an adaptation is done during the first reading. It is then you decide what will work on film and what won't.

RN: The book is a first person narrative, the movie is not. Why did you change the focus?

MF: I thought it was too narrow a point of view as written. And besides I hate narrators and voice overs. I thought that if I told the story objectively it would have a much broader impact.

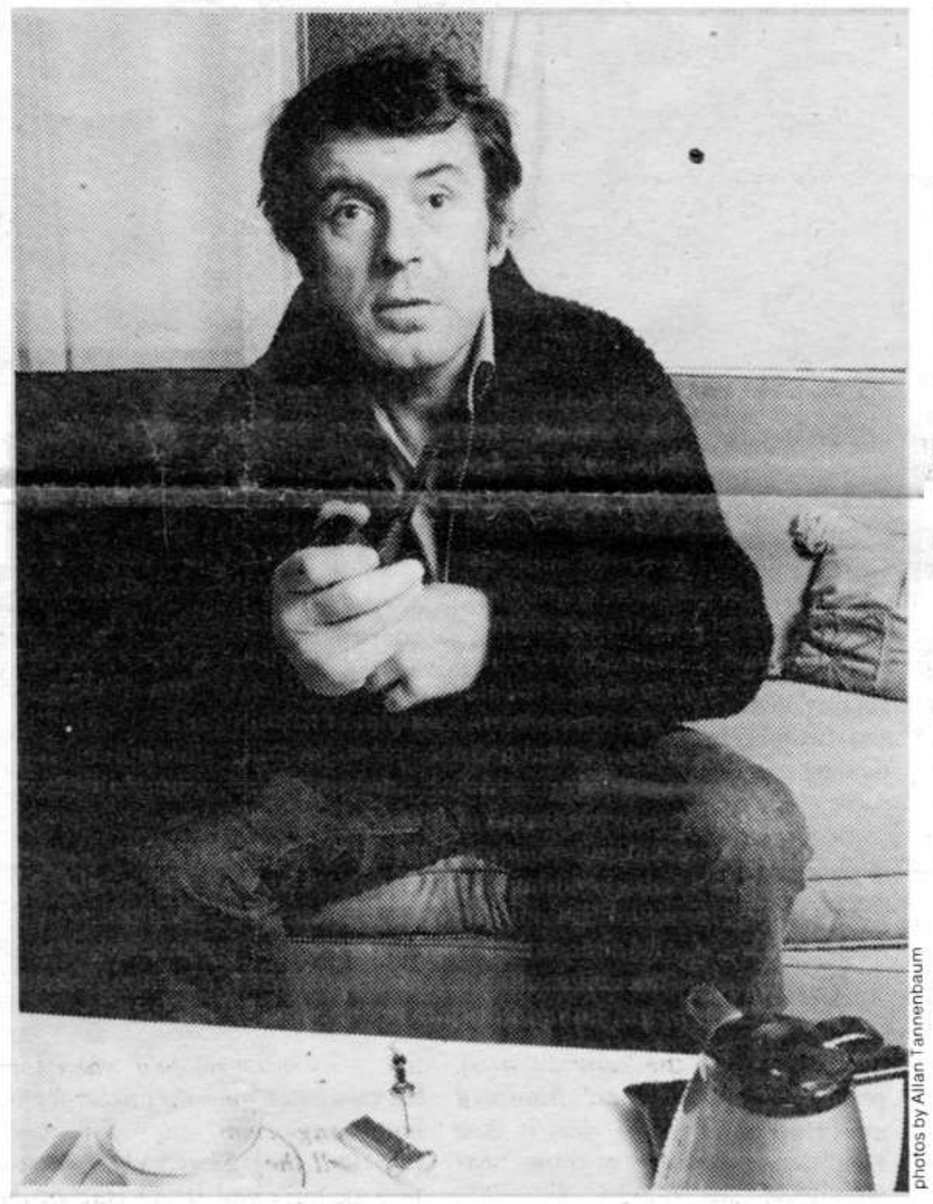
RN: The book is clearly a metaphor and yet you chose to tell the story on a very realistic level.

MF: If you are real the metaphor comes by itself. The story in its entirety is a metaphor, but that doesn't mean every detail has to be metaphorical. I don't like that type of film as a spectator and definitely not as a filmmaker. I'd rather the audience discover the metaphor by itself, and not have to rub their noses in it like a dog in shit.

MF: In the book, the Big Nurse was a symbol of the "Establishment." By making her a real human being don't you run the risk of making the story appear misogynistic?

MF: I don't think so. I am not blaming the woman. For me she is not mean. She only believes in the wrong things but she believes she is helping. In the book and on stage she was a caricature and quite mean. I thought it would be more dramatic to portray her as someone who thinks she is doing good when she is really evil. Mean people don't survive too long, but fanatics, yes.

RN: Most of the actors in the movie are not recognizable to film audiences. Doesn't it undermine the reality you were trying to achieve to put someone as well known as Jack Nicholson among them? Or was it that you had to have a star of Nicholson's magnitude to get the film financed?



photos by Allan Tannenbaum

MF: The movie was entirely financed by Saul Zaentz before I even suggested anyone. Jack was my first choice, but he wasn't available. We decided to wait for seven months, though we considered other actors, both known and unknown. I'm glad we waited. If any story ever called for a star it is this one. McMurphy (Nicholson) is a man from the world known to us who goes into a world unknown to us. It is important for us to know him. He represents us in a world of faces we never knew before.

RN: You spent a lot of time at Oregon State Hospital (where the movie was filmed) while you were writing the screenplay. Did it change your outlook on the film?

MF: Oh yes. I am now a specialist, an expert on mental institutions. As soon as I stepped into the hospital I saw that my ideas on what it is to be crazy were totally naive and false.

RN: How so?

MF: Well you always expect crazy behavior—screaming, climbing up walls. When you enter the ward you find people who are not terribly different from you trying desperately to behave normally, like alcoholics trying to appear sober.

RN: Then what makes them insane?

MF: As I said they are normal—except for that one thing. And that difference may not even show. There was one man who had been there seven years because he drove a screwdriver into the vagina of a small girl and molested her sexually. It was a mad moment. Something which had never happened before or afterwards. He will be there forever because there is no guarantee he will not do it again. Otherwise he is totally normal.

There is another guy, fourteen years old—very intelligent in the mechanical and technical fields. More so than any other fourteen year old. He is there for life too. He's an arsonist. If they let him out, within hours something will be on fire.

RN: You also rehearsed the film right in the hospital and encouraged the actors to mingle with the patients.

MF: Well when I realized the impact for me, I knew it would affect them the same way. During rehearsal breaks the actors would go into the wards. Before they arrived, I chose certain patients as models for each actor and they spent time observing them and talking to the doctors about them.

RN: Since the Oregon State Hospital is used as a specific locale for a movie which criticizes mental institutions, why were they so cooperative?

MF: In reality this institution is a heaven. The superintendent and the doctors are very progressive, very liberal. They are in favor of making an institution a home rather than a hospital. In the past, institutions were far from the cities. This was done to protect the community from the crazies, not to help them. Today the cities have grown so that these institutions are right in the middle of them. Now that they are in the community people must cope with them. Because the doctors know what they are doing, they are not afraid to show how it was in 1965.

RN: Is electric shock treatment still practiced?

MF: Oh yes. But it is much more humane now. Patients are given powerful drugs before they are zapped. It's much more congenial.

RN: You say you've just returned from Europe. How would you compare their current film output with that of the U.S.?

mf; I find Europe sad. Except for the established talents—Fellini, Truffaut, Bertolucci. etc.—all they are making is hypocritical pornography and silly stupid films.

RN: Why do you think this is so?

MF: I have no explanations for it. I just know that all the excitement is here and even Europe has turned to America for direction.

RN: Why do you think the U.S. is again the film mecca?

MF: It has a lot to do with the strong youth movement of the 1960s. It affected every intellectual aspect of society. People are now asking to see better films and the studios are responding to the public's curiosity. Also, TV has become so repetitive that the people are again turning to films.

RN: Has this spur of creativity affected you as a filmmaker?

MF: I'm sure it has. I am affected by my environment, I don't think I can define how it has affected me. It's more subconscious. I think I'm the same, but obviously I'm not.

RN: What's next on your agendy?

MF: Nothing definite. I have a number of projects in mind, but nothing definite as yet.