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films in focus

by Andrew Sarris

I happen to admire Robert Altman's "**McCABE AND MRS. MILLER**" even though many people whose opinions I respect don't like the movie and many people whose opinions I suspect do. Furthermore the main anti-argument

(pretentiousness) strikes a more responsive chord in my critical temperament than does the main pro-argument (realism). "McCabe and Mrs. Miller" is photographed through a test-pattern haze of pea soup, and much of the dialogue is thrown away so hard it bounces. The star turns of Warren

Beatty and Julie Christie trip and fall over the most cluttered mise-en-scene since the days of De Mille's jungle salons for slinky Swanson. I've heard tell that Altman was already over budget before he finished building a set more woody than Hollywood, and that he fits almost too neatly into the slot of sorehead directors like Stroheim, Brown and Peckinpah.

No matter. "McCabe and Mrs. Miller" confirms the impression of striking originality that goes beyond the Beetle Bailey mechanics of "MASH" to the more controlled horror and absurdism of "That Cold Day in the Park" and "Brewster McCloud." It is true that a large part of Altman's originality is more peculiar than effective, particularly the squashed jokes with the predictably deadpan reaction shots as if the joke had not been heard, or if heard, not understood, or if understood, not appreciated, or if appreciated, not acknowledged. By the time every character and every situation is run through this wringer of non-reaction, the audience may begin to yawn with American Antoniennui.

Hence, I don't expect "McCabe" to be any more successful than "Brewster" with the trendsy public. Nonetheless, "McCabe" succeeds, like "Brewster," almost in spite of itself, with a rousing finale which is less symbolic summation than poetic evocation of the fierce aloneness in American life. I can't remember when I have been so moved by something which has left me so uneasy to the marrow of my aesthetic. Unlike so many of his contemporaries, Altman tends to lose battles and win wars. Indeed, of how many other films can you say that the whole is better than its parts? Beatty's reluctant hero and Christie's matter-of-fact \$5 whore are nudged from bumptious farce through black comedy all the way to solitary tragedy imbedded in the communal indifference with which Altman identifies America. However, Altman neither celebrates nor scolds this communal indifference, but instead accepts it as one of the conditions of existence. In this way his stock company never degenerates into a chorus line, but remains an anarchic agglomeration of lumpy loners. Lumpy but never too stony. There is give and take and need as when McCabe rushes upstairs to Mrs. Miller, now suddenly the last great love of his scheming life, and is told casually that she is occupied with a customer, and he stops awkwardly in his tracks, weighs the news with studied calmness on his swaying shoulders, all the while disguising the lover's face with the businessman's mask, but without bitterness or malice or wounded pride in any way diminishing the love he feels for a woman as open as he.

I disagree with those detractors of "McCabe" who argue that Altman imposes an anti-establishment aura on the climactic gunfight. In my view Altman transforms what might have been parochial politics into universal poetics by shifting keys between the satire and the violence. I also disagree, however, with those defenders of "McCabe" who see Altman's achievement as the final nail in the coffin of the western genre. Quite the contrary. The best moments in "McCabe"

owe their majestic splendor to the moral integrity and psychological implacability of the western genre. Ultimately, "McCabe and Mrs. Miller" shapes up as a half-baked masterpiece with a kind of gutsy grandeur. It's personal as all-get-out, and I thought that's what everyone had been screaming for all these years. Not more factory fakery like "Love Story" and "Airport."