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'Nashville' Tars Majority With Flaws of Few

BY JOSEPH KRAFT

Pinning the tail on the American donkey is a notoriously hard act. The greatest literary artists, not to mention the analytic tools shaped by the likes of Marx and Freud, have come to grief in trying to define what's wrong with this country.

So it may seem unfair to pick on the new movie "Nashville" for not getting right the indictment of America. Still the film's view of the nation's flaws is so general and so wrong that it seems useful to identify the weakness in the argument.

"Nashville" tells the story of how some country-Western performers are conned into appearances at a political rally they wanted to avoid. The candidate, Hal Philip Walker, is an obvious phony. Indeed, he never appears, but keeps cropping up as a voice droning out from a sound truck semiplausible populist stuff about such things as a need to rid Congress of lawyers.

The performers are conned because they are all con artists themselves. Thus Barbara Jean, a girl singer, gushes forth publicly as America's sweetheart—Miss Wholesome 1975. In private, however, she is competitive with another singer to the point of panic.

The leading male singer, Haven Hamilton, is, when on mike, a kind of hillbilly Polonius. Off-mike, he throws tantrums.

A truly innocent waitress who wants only to sing in public comes on as a sexpot. An intrusive news hen constantly reads sermons

into stones which she knows carry no sermons.

The supreme con artist is a political advance man representing Hal Philip Walker. To help his candidate, he tells everybody just what they want to hear. The hillbilly Polonius is hooked for the candidate by hints at a political career; the waitress with an intimation of stardom; the girl singer, Barbara Jean, with an offer to outshine her rival. In the end, an assassin gets Barbara Jean as she and Haven Hamilton warm up the crowd for Hal Philip Walker.

Just in case there is a soul so dead as not to get the point, art borrows freely from nature: Hal Philip Walker is George Wallace without the middle name. John and Robert Kennedy are constantly discussed, and after the assassination somebody shouts, "This is not Dallas. It's Nashville."

After the Washington premiere I asked the director, Robert Altman, what the play had to do with Kansas City, which is his home town. "Nothing," he said. "What's it got to do with Nashville? It's about here. Washington."

Not surprisingly, accordingly, most viewers and all reviewers see a national allegory. Time magazine speaks of "the heartland," and the New York Times of "Middle America." As Kurt Vonnegut wrote in Vogue, "Nashville" is "a spiritual inventory of America."

In a pig's eye. The basic fact is that "Nashville" deals with a tiny segment of American life. It centers on a group set apart in explicit ways from the great majority.

These people do not have real decisions to make. They concern themselves chiefly with appearance and image. If they fail, they must move on. Inevitably, their lives are hollow, their values shallow.

In some ways, to be sure, political leaders fit that mold. At the campaign level at least, showbiz and politics merge. But most of American life, and most of American politics, is characterized by different, indeed opposite features.

The special quality of our national life is the peculiar American ability to organize vast groups of human beings for everyday economic purposes. Most Americans are connected with a mass institution. They work in a company, a bureaucracy or an army. They draw values from a community. They enjoy fellowship in a club or clique.

All these people, moreover, face decisions that are not only personal, dilemmas that are not merely matters of vanity. Their choices make the country go round. They determine whether there will be jobs and schools and food and public order.

National political life is deeply bound up with these choices. The leaders of this country do not merely con themselves and their followers.

So while "Nashville" may be a good movie, it is a significant commentary on national life only in a limited way. What it chiefly says is how much our national introspection has got away from the true sources of our national life.