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Author(s)	Joy Gould Boyum
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Films With Old Familiar Faces

By JOY GOULD BOYUM

To loosely paraphrase Tolstol—every good movie is good in its own way; bad ones tend to be all alike. Or at least they seem to fall into stereotypical patterns of failure. One Sam Peckinpah adventure will be marred by the same machismo morality as another, while most disaster films will suffer from the same one-dimensional characterization and over-reliance on special effects. And so it goes with several current releases, each of which fails in ways so typical either of its kind or its maker as to tempt a critic to take out last year's review and simply change a credit or two.

Take "The Champ," a remake which has fallen prey to just about every flaw this type of movie is prone to. Like others

On Film

"The Champ"

"A Perfect Couple"

"Love on the Run"

of its ilk, "The Champ" (which reworks the classic Wallace Beery vehicle) is troubled by its antiquated conventions and its anachronistic sentiments. Its tale of a down-and-out boxer, his adorable 8-year-old son and the wayward wife and mother who suddenly reappears to reclaim her long-lost child may have driven audiences to get out their handkerchiefs back in the 1930s. Today it will do little more than drive them out of the theater.

It's full of blatant contrivances (the marriage of the proverbial lady to the proverbial tramp), romanticized views of characters (the stout-hearted, pure-souled child who, though raised by an irresponsible alcoholic, emerges totally unblemished) and tearful encounters (the child rejected by the parent he adores).

Such a film also frequently faces difficulties in casting, because styles of character have changed over the years and so too have styles of actors. Faye Dunaway's nervously neurotic and emphatically contemporary quality make absurd her claims for old-fashioned motherhood. Jon Voight's clean-cut, robust aura totally undermines his efforts to play at being Wallace Beery—three-day-old beard and "dese, dem, and dose" speech pattern notwithstanding. The direction is ludicrously out-of-key. Today's lavish visual styles are in any case at odds with the intimate domestic dramas of yesteryear, and with an operatic director like Franco Zeffirelli pulling out all the stops, the result is cacophony.

The greatest problem the remake faces is that it tends to seem superfluous—witness the latest frustrating and empty exercise from director Robert Altman. Like his "A Wedding," released earlier this year, "A Perfect Couple" centers on two disparate families brought together through a love affair: here, the wealthy, patriarchal, old-world Greek family to which middle-aged Alex (Paul Dooley) belongs and the rock commune of which his romantic partner, Sheila (Marta Heflin) is a member.

Like "A Wedding," "A Perfect Couple" suffers from excess, incoherence and a muddled tone. Its jokes, while now and then wry and witty (those, for example, relating to the computer dating service through which Alex and Sheila meet), are more often overly broad. Mr. Altman's eye for the bizarre frequently leads him to focus more on what is merely freakish than on what is truly funny. This freakishness extends even to his main characters and deprives them of sufficient humanity to make them command our concern and sympathy. Troubling, too, is Mr. Altman's characteristic free-floating form which, distracted and distracting, ends up confusing and confounding us.

In other words, we're hard put to discover just what the point of all this is—a problem that confronts us even more graphically in the case of Francois Truffaut's "Love on the Run." For here is a film which not only shares problems with the director's previous work, "The Man Who Loved Women," but which might just as well have had the same title. As before, Mr. Truffaut takes as his subject a man whose entire life has evidently been devoted to the pursuit of women. As before, the subject is treated without much thematic point. Worse, we aren't even given much of a film, since a large part of "Love on the Run" is made up of actual filmclips of Truffaut's earlier works.

All of these clips, of course, have to do with the life and loves of a Truffaut alter ego, Antoine Doinel (Jean-Pierre Leaud) who in this film is going through a divorce. He encounters an old flame and rethinks his past.

Certainly, these bits and pieces of "The 400 Blows," "Love at Twenty," etc. are delightful in themselves and nostalgia-laden for Truffaut fans. But their overall effect is an unfortunate one in that their very freshness only serves to point up the staleness of "Love on the Run," while Antoine's earlier sensitivity and charm only make more emphatic his present triviality and dullness. And so, we are left with the same uncomfortable feeling we were given by "The Man Who Loved Women"—that of knowing and caring less about the fluctuating passions of the film's central character than of the failing inspiration of that character's once gifted creator.