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# films in focus

by Andrew Sarris

'M\*A\*S\*H' (hereafter

known as "MASH" for Mobile Army Surgical Hospital) is a difficult movie to describe with any degree of credibility. It is a good movie, a funny movie, and, ultimately, a moving movie, but I feel that some of the advance raves and ad slogans may be somewhat misleading in their intimations of controlled absurdism on the order of "Dr. Strangelove," "Putney Swope," and (who knows?) the forthcoming "Catch-22." In its general outline and episodic development, "MASH" seems to be a relatively conventional service comedy on that most stupefyingly boring of all wars, the late, unlamented Korean War. This war, not so much absurd as merely ridiculous, denied my own truly lost generation both the tumultuous heroics of World War II and the tumultuous anti-heroics of Vietnam. These, if you remember, were the years more of Joe McCarthy than Gene McCarthy, years in which individual dissent was treated invariably as incipient paranoia. But the pattern was set in Korea for avoiding front-line action through a combination of bureaucratic cunning and class privilege. The ratty principle of rugged individualism prevailed without undue publicity, and the attractive blueprints for limited wars began to resemble the ancient prescriptions for the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. The cynicism first sowed in Korea has now been reaped in full bitterness in Vietnam. That I was part of that cynicism is affirmed in a spirit more of mea culpa than self-righteousness.

"MASH" will undoubtedly strike some viewers as a cathartic belch of anti-Agnewism, and from a bible belt viewpoint the film is singularly irreverent and sacrilegious, so much so that the Variety reviewer made the audacious suggestion that a brilliant Last Supper composition be stricken from the print upon penalty (I presume) of commercial excommunication. The protagonists of "MASH" give short shrift to the outward forms of religiosity, but they would not exude as much warmth as they do if they did not partake of that inner glow to which all religions profess to aspire.

But the irreverence, pleasantly liberated as it seems, is not the source of the film's extraordinary grace and charm. Somewhere in the interplay of Robert Altman's direction of "MASH" for producer Ingo Preminger from Ring Lardner, Jr.'s, adaptation of the best-selling novel by Richard Hooker, a pseudonym for a leading surgeon, there arose a stylistic tension between a conventional comedy genre and an unconventional newsreel camera treatment. Consequently, the brilliant performances of Donald Sutherland as Hawkeye and Elliott Gould as Trapper John are not given the visually shiny emphasis and compositional dominance of, say, Dick Shawn and James Coburn and Harry Morgan in Blake Edwards's "What Did You Do in the War, Daddy?". But neither are the performances subordinated to an overall theme of absurdism as they are in "Dr. Strangelove" and (presumably) "Catch-22." We are still looking at a stylized service comedy when we look at "MASH," but a few new accessories have been added, and the most notable of these is gruesomely comic bloodiness in the hospital sequences. Here, I think, is the key to the film's credibility as an account of psychological compensation. Most service comedies remain relatively bloodless in order to

avoid mixing genres and thereby becoming liable to the charge of tastelessness. (War and death are no laughing matters, etc.) "MASH" not only mixes blood and slapstick; it establishes the psychological origin of its humor in its horror. And the humor goes beyond the horror of the Korean War and indeed of all war to something much deeper in the human experience.

The movie remains enjoyable, however, not so much because we are reminded time and again in DeLuxe Color that war is gore as because once our humanitarian scruples are satisfied satirically we are left in the hands of authentic heroes posing as anti-heroes. Watching Sutherland and Gould terrifying the guardians of red tape is the most exhilarating liberal fantasy since Cary Grant spoke out for intellectuals against farmers in Joseph L. Mankiewicz's "People Will Talk." Also, Robert Altman's seemingly impersonal pans and camera movements keep even Sutherland and Gould from smothering the milieu with star personalities, and good lines are well distributed throughout the cast for fast, autonomous, and generously idiosyncratic readings. The otherness of people is respected as deeply in "MASH" as in "The Milky Way," and there is both continuity and development in even the most peripheral characters on the base. All in all, "MASH" demonstrates that good movies can be made despite the relaxation of tabus, and that a truly monumental blonde (Sally Kellerman) can be fully explored without being foully exploited. Indeed, the warm, civilized vibrations of "MASH" offer heartening proofs that liberty need not degenerate into license when the will to excellence is operative.