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REVIEWS & LISTINGS



Jack Nicholson (left) and Milos Forman (right) hold a conference at the Oregon State Mental Hospital during the shooting of *Cuckoo's Nest*.

Cuckoo's Nest Re-examines American Myths

Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* has taken a long time to reach the screen. Published in 1963, the novel was turned into a successful stage play and a number of film-makers expressed interest; but the grim, downbeat quality of the story obviously frightened the Hollywood bosses. The current filming of *Cuckoo's Nest* implies that the movie does not have the explosiveness that it might have had in the mid-'60s, when the book first achieved status as an underground favorite.

By now Kesey's ideas about freedom and madness and nonconformity have been so completely assimilated into mass culture that the movie no longer seems dangerous or controversial. Kesey's celebration of the heroic, free-thinking maverick bat-

ting a repressive authoritarian system — a battle set in a mental hospital, but clearly meant to symbolize a more universal social conflict — is already a pop cliché. The popularity of R. D. Laing's romantic conception of madness as unconventional, but somehow worthwhile behavior works to the film's advantage. The young audience that adores *King of Hearts* has already been primed to accept Kesey's neat, predictable allegory about an asylum where the keepers are crazier than the inmates.

The screenwriters, Lawrence Hauben and Bo Goldman, wisely decided to set the movie in 1963; they recognized that *Cuckoo's Nest* would seem more strained if updated. Directed by Milos Forman, and featuring a striking cast of largely unfamiliar faces, the movie is aston-

ishingly well-made. Kesey's ideas may be facile, but his strong, straightforward narrative translates beautifully to the screen. The steadily escalating battle between McMurphy and the deadly Nurse Ratched generates acute dramatic tension, and the confined setting gives the movie a claustrophobic intensity.

Forman has capitalized on the novel's strengths and minimized its weaknesses. The film is perfectly realistic in style, built with careful attention to detail; the allegory is never belabored. The inmates are not one-dimensional symbols of freedom or misunderstood misfits; they are maddening, contradictory, elusive characters, and all of the roles are brilliantly cast and performed. Forman and his writers have even tried to complicate the central dramatic conflict between

McMurphy and the Big Nurse without undermining its primitive force.

McMurphy is not such a roaring, defiant rebel as he was in the book. Jack Nicholson, who might have overdone the brawling lustiness, is more restrained than usual, and he brings off several quiet, reflective moments that provide an effective counterpoint to the scenes of exuberance and rage. Instead of making Nurse Ratched a monster, Forman has made her a prototype of the soft-spoken, sweetly reasonable institutional bureaucrat; Louise Fletcher plays her with a lilting, musical voice, a baby-faced smile, and a will of steel.

While underplaying the melodrama, Forman respects the elemental tensions of the story. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is a classic American fa-

ble; it reworks enduring American myths that still carry an emotional charge. American writers, from Cooper and Twain to Hemingway and Mailer, have been obsessed with ideals of freedom, and with the struggle to shatter all restraints that society places on the natural man. Long after the closing of the frontier, American dreamers search for an adventure comparable to the pioneer experience; we still secretly believe that civilization is a trap, and that there is a richer life to be found on the road or in the wilderness.

In Kesey's version of this perennial American fairy tale, McMurphy is the life-force, the outsider who won't play by society's rules; he is also the Western gunfighter in the cuckoo's nest. Chief Bromden, the narrator of the novel, describes him as "the cowboy out of the TV set walking down the middle of the street to meet a dare." The other patients in the ward are willing victims, men who have already surrendered to the system, and the story is about how McMurphy liberates them by renewing their belief in freedom; he inspires them, but destroys himself in the process.

In the hands of a macho American director — John Milius, for example — *Cuckoo's Nest* might have been insufferable, full of bellowing and brawling, hysteria and self-pity. Forman, who is not an American, gives the story the detached, ironic note that it needs; he doesn't push or underline anything. Because of the mastery of Forman's direction, and because of the power of the myths it enshrines, the movie takes fire. But the American legends exalted in *Cuckoo's Nest* can no longer be taken at face value, and Forman does not succeed in glossing over all the troubling implications of Kesey's fable. The movie provides a rousing emotional experience, and for most audiences that may be enough; they won't mind the oversimplifications and distortions in this epic of Americana.

Cuckoo's Nest became a campus cult novel because of the appeal of its equation of madness with freedom and the crudeness of its contest between individual and society. Like many American writers, Kesey is suspicious of all social organization and as an alternative to repressive social authority, he can only imagine an idealized life in nature. At the very end, when Chief Bromden crashes through the window of the asylum, the last shot is of him running toward the mountains. It is impossible to imagine where he might go; Kesey fails to suggest what kind of society he might function in and we may respond to the beauty of this final image without fully assenting in the underlying fantasy.

This ending, with its echoes of Huckleberry Finn lighting out for "the territory," or Yossarian setting sail at the end of *Catch-22*, underscores Kesey's inability to recognize

the possibility of any kind of meaningful life in society; he cannot conceive of a mature and enlightened human community. In Kesey's view society is simply repressive, destructive, evil, and although there is something appealingly romantic in this radical rejection of the very fabric of society, there is also something childish in the dream of escape from all convention and discipline. Kesey dreams of a world without regulation.

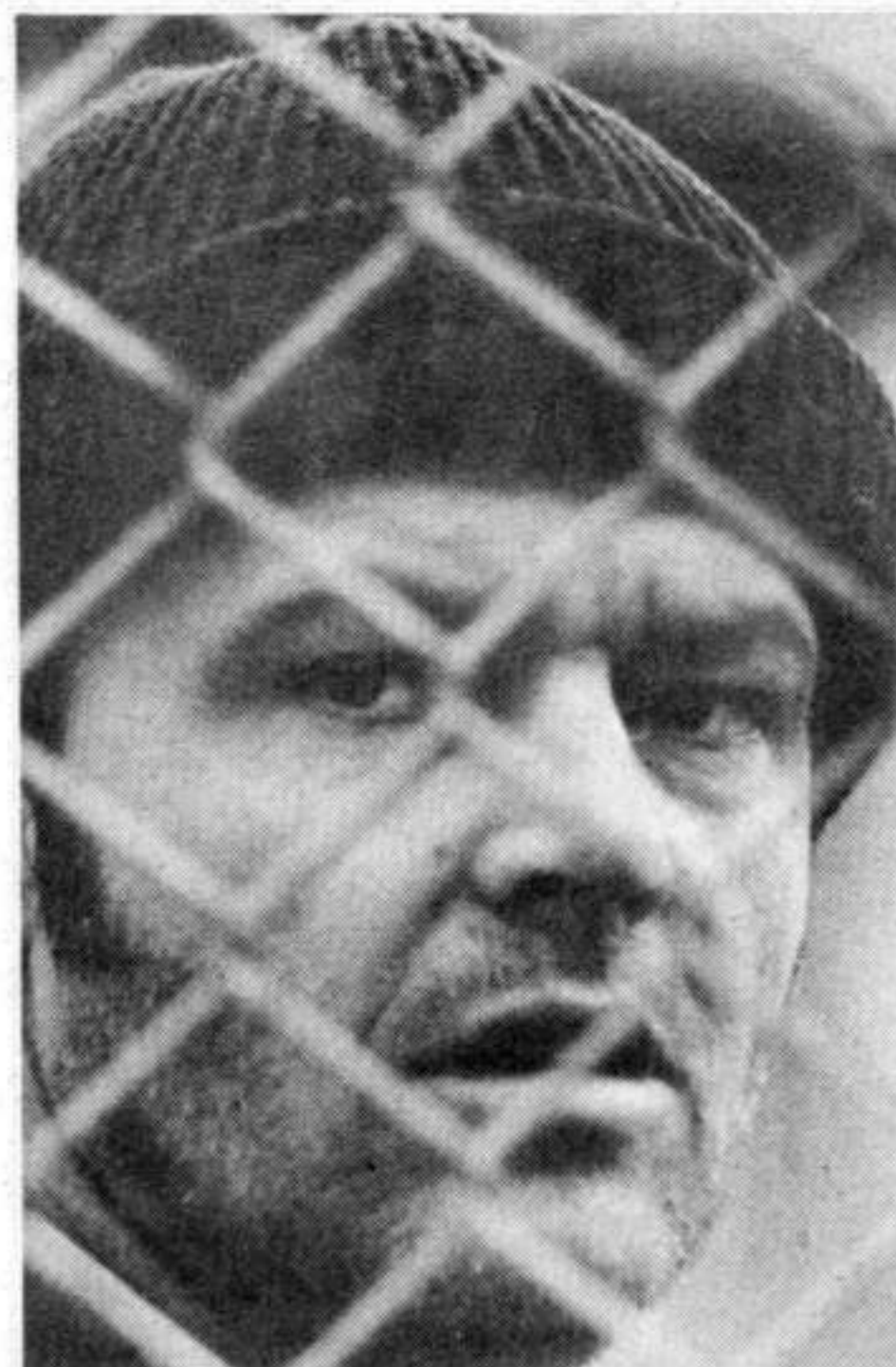
The fantasy is exclusively a boy's fantasy. In Kesey's fable, as in the stories of many other American writers, society is ruled by women, and freedom can only be found in an escape from the feminine influence. In the classic westerns from which *Cuckoo's Nest* derives, the woman is the one who brings civilization to the frontier, and this is always seen as an ambiguous victory; westerns are haunted by the fear that women want to control and regulate men's yearning to be free.

Kesey's view cannot really be described as ambivalent; *Cuckoo's Nest* is infused with a suspicion, horror, and hatred of women. The mental ward is a matriarchy; although the doctors pretend to be in control, it is Nurse Ratched — the Big Nurse — who rules the roost. McMurphy describes her as "a bitch and a buzzard and a ball-cutter," and in Kesey's view she is not exactly unrepresentative of her sex. Most of the men in the asylum have been driven there by women. Kesey really believes the old myth that powerful women want to castrate men; this is the aspect of the book that is most disturbing.

In the film Kesey's misogyny has been toned down. Nurse Ratched is not so grotesque, and the sexual conflict between McMurphy and her is subdued; when he attacks her at the end, he does not rip open her uniform to expose her breasts. The adapters have also removed some of the anti-feminist details in the backgrounds of the other characters; there is no mention of Chief Bromden's destructive white mother. These changes soften but do not eliminate the story's sexist bias. Nurse Ratched may not be the gorgon of the novel, but she is still devious, ice cold and deadly beneath her peaches and cream exterior. The rigidity of Kesey's concept makes her an abstraction of evil, without any of the human quirks that a truly dangerous tyrant has.

It seems depressing that in a film setting out to attack dehumanization, the character of the Nurse is so completely dehumanized. The filmmakers' inability to envision — even for an instant — what the world might look like from the Nurse's point of view represents a significant failure of imagination.

The other women mentioned in the film are tempters and destroyers. McMurphy was sent to prison because of his statutory rape of a girl, "15 going on 35," a cunning little tart who set him up for the slaughter.



McMurphy at a reflective moment.

And when Billy Bibbit (affectingly played by Brad Dourif) commits suicide, it is because Nurse Ratched threatens to tell his mother about his first sexual experience. Whenever a writer is unable to come up with motivation for a character, he can always place the blame on Mom. Billy's suicide is the one scene in the film where the melodramatic wheels really creak, where Forman seems to have been most seriously hamstrung by the idiotic sexual attitudes of the novel.

The only sympathetic women in the film are the two whores whom McMurphy sneaks into the asylum. In Kesey's adolescent fantasy the only women who can be accepted as equals are the whores with pea brains and hearts of gold.

The only meaningful relationships in the film are the relationships between the men. Like many American fictions, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* idealizes male camaraderie. The mental ward, like summer camp or army barracks, is an all-male society and there is something childish about the locker room camaraderie; it is not exactly homosexual, but presexual, a kind of sanctuary for men too frightened to enter a threatening adult world where men and women are equal. McMurphy unites the men by getting them interested in sports, acting out the World Series and organizing a basketball game. In his classic essay, "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey," a speculation on the boyish homoerotic fantasies of American literature, Leslie Fiedler wrote of "the regressiveness, in a technical sense, of American life, its implacable nostalgia for the infantile." *Cuckoo's Nest* freezes this infantile vision; it takes place in a world where two buddies know the purest kind of love.

The real love affair in the film is that of McMurphy and Chief Bromden. McMurphy reawakens the Chief and brings him back to life.

Will Sampson's magnificent performance gives the Chief dignity and heroic stature, but he cannot entirely redeem the sentimentality of this central relationship. At the end McMurphy and the Chief are planning to run off to Canada together, but when the Chief discovers that McMurphy has been lobotomized, he cradles his friend in his arms before smothering him; this love-death scene is charged with an almost overtly sexual passion. The relationship of McMurphy and the Chief recalls that of Ishmael and Queequeg in *Moby Dick*, or Huck and Nigger Jim in *Huckleberry Finn*, it revives a familiar American fantasy. Fiedler called *Cuckoo's Nest* "the old, old fable of the White outcast and noble Red Man joined together against home and mother, against the female world of civilization."

In 1963, when the novel was published, many readers were blissfully ignorant of the sexual prejudices that Kesey reinforced. But in the last decade, we have lost our innocence. Kesey's belligerent machismo no longer seems so charming; we are more aware of the contempt for women that underlies this all-male idyll. Political evaluations of art are always suspect, and I am not trying to suggest that *Cuckoo's Nest* is worthless because its views do not conform to the credo of the women's movement; but we cannot help re-evaluating literature and films as our own awareness changes.

One can compare this movie to Lina Wertmüller's *Swept Away*, another film that has recently been condemned by feminists. The difference in these two films' visions of women is that Wertmüller mocks her heroine without dehumanizing her. Rafaella is a rich bitch capitalist exploiter, but she has so much energy, vitality, wit and intelligence that our response to her is always complicated. In *Cuckoo's Nest* only the men are rounded, unpredictable, three-dimensional characters; the women are stick figures.

The film of *Cuckoo's Nest* still has tremendous power and I suspect most men respond to it on a very primitive level. No matter how sophisticated we are, this film reaches us; its resurrection of traditional American ideals of freedom and masculinity, its celebration of innocent male friendships, and its suspicion of all women who are not whores are the cornerstones of our shared folklore, and we have not yet exorcised the hold of these myths. The slippery thing about *Cuckoo's Nest* is that the profound and admirable values that it champions are inseparable from the insidious sexual prejudices that it perpetuates. Maybe once we are away from the spell of Forman's impressive, electrifying film, we can detach ourselves in order to question the underpinnings of this archetypal American fable.

— Stephen Farber