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## FILM FEEDBACK: A RESPONSE TO A FILM

# A HERO AIN'T NOTHIN' BUT A SANDWICH



Robert Radnitz is known for his major contribution to the list of American-made family films. To church groups he is familiar also as the recipient of many ecumenical awards. And to readers of "Film Feedback" he should be especially well known, this being the fourth of these discussion guides to deal with a Radnitz production. Thus, the National Council of Churches continues the support it has accorded the work of this outstanding filmmaker over the years.

In *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich*, his latest film, Radnitz again focuses as he did in *Sounder* (1972) on black family life. The setting is the Southeast section of Los Angeles; the time is the present. The story revolves around Benjie, a 13-year-old boy, who lives with his attractive young mother, his grandmother, and Butler, his mother's lover. His father had deserted him and his mother three years earlier, but the lad refuses to accept the finality of his loss. To him, the missing man is an idealized father figure, and Butler is an intruder—nothing Butler does can win his confidence. Sweets, his mother, fiercely loyal to her son, puts off marrying Butler. As these seemingly irreconcilable difficulties cause increased tension at home, Benjie spends more and more time with his friends on the outside.

What can black kids do to escape ghetto ugliness? Benjie and his best friend, Jimmy Lee, visit Carswell, a schoolmate who, using discarded furniture and assorted bits of retrieved junk, has created a rooftop "club." There the boys get high smoking marijuana. Already, the lure of the "candyman" has been accepted as part of daily life.

It is a short step from the recreational use of drugs to drug dependency. We know that actual arrest records and hospital reports show counts of known black addicts to range as high as 350,000. In *Hero*, Benjie joins their ranks—he becomes a heroin addict at thirteen. To feed his habit, he does what Tiger, a pusher, demands that he do: he steals and runs drugs.

At home, Benjie manages to hide his drug dependency. But in school, his teachers notice that the formerly bright, alert pupil sleeps most of the day. Eventually, they arrange for him to be put into a hospital for detoxification. The intense physical agony that Benjie must endure until he is free of his habit, and the psychological shock endured by both him and his family, is realistically portrayed. This is an honest film—and in its honesty lies its strength.

*Hero* is also full of vibrant joy, humor and warmth. And when at the end Benjie and Butler have bridged the communication gap between them and have achieved a deep, loving respect

for each other, we realize that a Radnitz film, even one dealing with problems of such frightening aspects as *Hero* does, always reassures us that the human spirit has the potential to transcend adversity with strength and dignity.

As former U.S. Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas once said of the films of Bob Radnitz, "they touch the common thread of humanity."

*Hero* marks the first reunion of the stars of the award-winning *Sounder*, Cicely Tyson and Paul Winfield. Ms. Tyson as Sweets and Mr. Winfield as Butler create memorable characters. We can identify with their frustrations, their striving for happiness (but not at the cost of others), and their weaknesses. During the film they develop, and grow, and become less vulnerable to the problems they must face. Theirs is a story in which love is pitted against almost unsurmountable social forces.

The catalyst, the pivotal figure in *Hero*, is, of course, Benjie. Largely through him, Sweets and Butler come to understand a great deal about sacrifice. Benjie is portrayed by Larry Scott (born 1961 in New York City). His performance, as the boy who goes through the kind of hell that is all too prevalent in real life today, helps to give the film its feeling of remarkable authenticity. Watching his withdrawal symptoms could do more to warn all young people of the dangers of drug addiction than any amount of factual information given them in schools or elsewhere. As the Reverend Jesse L. Jackson puts it, *Hero* "is a film that *all families* and *all educators* should see *with* their children." (Parents should note that because of its strong ghetto language, its depiction of mature family relationships, and its realistic treatment of drug addiction, *Hero* may be too strong for impressionable children under thirteen.)

The Reverend Jackson makes his suggestions probably because he knows how destructive drug addiction is to blacks. Of all opiate users who have been involved in some kind of treatment, one half are black. Drug abuse is the substitute for something otherwise missing. Not surprisingly, the greatest amount of drug use in the black community takes place in the areas of greatest deprivation. But the drug problem is not endemic to any one people or locality; it is to be found among whites in Beverly Hills, CA., and Rye, New York, as well as among blacks in Watts and Harlem. Just why this twentieth century evil is so difficult to contain is best explained by the following fact: profits from heroin smuggling in the U.S.A. alone are up to \$10 billion.

The production elements that Radnitz has assembled for *Hero* are all of top quality. Besides Tyson and Winfield, the talented cast in strong supporting roles includes Helen Martin as the grandmother, Glynn Turman as a black militant teacher, and Kevin Hooks as the wily drug dealer. The youngsters are as appealing as they are convincing in their dramatic portrayals: Larry B. Scott as Benjie, Kenneth "Joey" Green as Jimmy Lee, and Erin Blunt as Carswell, their buddy, and many of the students of Washington Carver Junior High School. Directing the cast in the story's actual locale is Ralph Nelson, whose

**FILM FEEDBACK** is a service of the Broadcasting and Film Commission, National Council of Churches, as part of its film education program. FF calls attention to worthwhile films of interest to the church audience. It is hoped that FF can encourage church groups to view and discuss these films, thereby leading to greater understanding of the issues involved and a strengthening of Christian discrimination.



career has long been associated with socially-relevant themes in such movies as *Requiem for a Heavyweight* (1962) and *Lilies of the Field* (1963) for which Sidney Poitier won the Academy Award for best actor, and *Charly* (1967) for which Cliff Robertson was similarly honored. The award-winning novel upon which the film is based was written by Alice Childress who also adapted it for the screen.

*Hero* is a drama, a serious movie which bears out Mr. Radnitz's film philosophy. "Movies are not only an entertainment medium," says the producer who began his career as a teacher, "they're an educational medium. And these don't have to be divergent qualities."

Of course, we expect to be entertained when we go to the movies. But movies also can make us react through our *feelings* to issues of importance. We come away from viewing *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich* with a better understanding of a contemporary problem of great immediacy.

#### SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What are some of the reasons the mother gives for not marrying the man she is living with? Why has she developed a reluctance to commit herself to another husband?
2. Were the filmmakers justified in using the strong expletives that are a part of ghetto jargon? Do these words have the same force and meaning in the ghetto as they do in the rest of society?
3. What does the title mean for young people who are growing up in an age without any sure sense of values? Does Butler provide a good model of a person who lives with integrity from day to day?
4. What does the black teacher hope to achieve by fostering a sense of black pride among his students? Is he right?
5. Is Benjie's anguished prayer to God to send him a sign that someone believes in him answered in the film?
6. Should young people see this film? Why?
7. What are some of the values of black family life that emerge in this film?
8. What are the first steps in eradicating drug addiction?

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#### RESOURCES

List resources available from Dept. of Drug & Alcohol Concerns, Board of Church and Society, The United Methodist Church, 100 Maryland Avenue N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002.

Passages on Drug Abuse from Black Literature, Dept. of Health, Education and Welfare, Public Health Service, National Institute of Mental Health, 5600 Fishers Lane, Rockville, Maryland 20852.

Reprint: Summer 1977 issue, The Church and Alcoholism: A Growing Involvement. D.A.C. Bulletin, Dept. of Drug & Alcohol Concerns, Board of Church and Society, 100 Maryland Avenue N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002.

Engage/Social Action - ESA - Forum 35, Drug and Alcohol Abuse: Prevention Rather Than Cure - Available from same source as above.

Roger Corman

Presents

A Robert B. Radnitz/Mattel Production

### "A HERO AIN'T NOTHIN' BUT A SANDWICH"

A New World Picture

#### Cast

Sweets	Cicely Tyson
Butler	Paul Winfield
Benjie	Larry B. Scott
Mrs. Bell	Helen Martin
Nigeria	Glynn Turman
Cohen	David Groh
Tiger	Kevin Hooks
Jimmy Lee	Kenneth "Joey" Green

Students from George Washington Carver Junior High School and friends from the Tarzana Psychiatric Hospital.

#### Technical Credits

Producer	Robert B. Radnitz
Director	Ralph Nelson
Screenplay	Alice Childress
Associate Producers	Terry Nelson
	Hal De Windt
Production Designer	Walter Scott Herndon
Film Editor	Fred Chulack, A.C.E.
Music	Tom McIntosh
Performed by	The Herbert Laws Group
Director of Photography	Frank Stanley, A.S.C.