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A Hero Ain't Nothing But a Sandwich
Columbia I, New Embassy, 46th St.

As its title indicates, Ralph Nelson's *A Hero Ain't Nothing But a Sandwich* is a determinedly honest film. Survival today — especially in an urban ghetto, where the film takes place — is based upon such tangible realities as getting enough to eat, not on glamorized portraits of heroes and superstars. Nelson's movie has the rare quality of remaining painstakingly honest about the realities it describes, and yet delivering that honesty with heart and feeling. Among other things, it is surely the best film ever made about drug addiction because it never lies: it tells the truth about the "high," the peace, the glorious escape that heroin gives — as well as the disastrous details of the aftermath, the slow recovery, the backsliding. By daring to really tell the whole truth, instead of merely preaching, moralizing, stacking the deck, *Hero* succeeds instinctively where possibly better films have failed.

Hero reunites the three stars of the enormously successful *Sounder* — Cicely Tyson, Paul Winfield and Kevin Hooks — and, like *Sounder*, it has the implicit irony of being a major black film made by a white director. But New York playwright and novelist Alice Childress has adapted her own novel to the screen and has done it with such honesty that the Mr. Charley question (Nelson's not being black) becomes almost a moot point. Nelson is a straightforward, non-"stylish" director whose strong suit is getting the best out of his actors, and he succeeds admirably here, as he did previously in films like *Lilies of the Field* and *Charly*.

The story is one of a black family unit in crisis, focusing particularly on the 13-year-old son (Larry B. Scott). Unable to deal with his own feelings of loneliness and abandonment (his father split the scene some three years before and hasn't been heard from since) or to accept affection from his peers, his teachers or his family, he slips easily into the hard-drug trap set for him by a fast-talking, high-living pusher (Hooks).

At home, his mother (Tyson), her lover (Winfield), and her mother (Helen Martin) all try to break down his resistance, through overprotectiveness, jive camaraderie and what I think Childress means to typify as religious senility, respectively. All of them, predicatably, fail, and the boy, left to his own devices, slips into addiction instead.

Taken to a kind of group therapy institute (based evidently on the Tarzana Psychiatric Hospital in Los Angeles, which the film makes you want to know more about), the boy bounces back. But thrown back into the outside world, including the bickering family unit, he finds things are no easier than before. He starts disappearing again — from home and from the screen — and we, like his family, wonder if he's backsliding into addiction again. It's never really clear, and that's one of the nice things about the film. What he does seem to begin to understand, slowly but surely, is that his hope is not in heroes, or institutions, or even other people; it's in himself. The path to self-knowledge and self-acceptance is lonely and brutal, but it's the only way to really get to what Winfield, in the final words of the film, calls "nation time."

Winfield and Tyson are fine, but the real performance in the film is by Scott as the boy — particularly the scenes where he's shooting up or coming down, and one other when he comes back from the clinic to find his room — i.e., his private space — redecorated as a well-intentioned surprise by his grandmother and his mother's lover. Helen Martin is also very fine as the grandmother, with hinted-at personal problems that we never fully understand — a nice realistic touch. Glynn Turman, fresh from his embarrassing cameo in Ingmar Bergman's *Serpent's Egg* is stunning as an elementary school teacher who transforms black history and a black-is-beautiful philosophy into a living, breathing, believable life-style for his students.

Thank god somebody's still making movies about what it means to be a man without throwing to the wind all vestiges of human decency and sensibility the way Paul Schrader insists on doing.

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