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By Andrew Sarris

... AND JUSTICE FOR ALL. Directed by Norman Jewison. Written by Valerie Curtin and Barry Levinson. Produced by Jewison and Patrick J. Palmer. A Joe Wizan Presentation released by Columbia Pictures.

Norman Jewison's . . . *And Justice for All* begins on a note of cynical bravura, and never lets up except to encircle Al Pacino within a halo of punk idealism. The title is rendered ironically in the background of the credits significantly stumbling recitation by children of the "Pledge of Allegiance." The architectural majesty of courtrooms, judge's benches, and jurors's boxes is counterposed against the semantical squalor of the admonitory signs on the walls. This is not America, obviously, but Amerika. The film opens with a shot of two pairs of shoes, one a policeman's flat-black, the other a prostitute's spiked-heeled. The prostitute turns out to be a black transvestite (Robert Christian) in the process of being booked on a felony charge. In most films of this genre, such a conspicuously outrageous character is almost invariably sassy and jail-wise. But not here. Ralph Agee, as the transvestite is named, seems completely traumatized by the taunts of the cops and the inmates. We do not have to wait long to find out why. As the camera pans along the jail cells, we find Al Pacino behind bars, taking in the whole sadistic spectacle. Gradually we learn that he has been incarcerated for contempt of court, or, more precisely, for taking a swing at a brutal judge who had kept one of Pacino's clients in jail on a technicality. As Pacino is being released from jail, he makes a plea that the transvestite be treated more humanely, a plea that is routinely ignored.

And so it goes through the rest of the film. Pacino as a crusading public defender is on the right side of every argument, and all around him is an unending demonstration of evil, corruption, indifference, incompetence, buffonery, and outright lunacy. One presiding magistrate (Jack Warden) brings his noisy courtroom to order by firing a gun in the air. This same judge eats his lunch on the ledge outside his office window and takes semi-suicidal helicopter rides for relaxation. Another judge (John Forsythe) seems to have been weaned on *Mein Kampf* rather than on the American Constitution. Since most of the trials involve one or the other of these two very sick judicial jokes, the view from Pacino's public defender's desk is jaundiced, to say the least.

Yet we are asked to believe throughout the film that Pacino's Arthur Kirkland is a deeply respected member of the city's legal establishment, and that his word carries some weight even with his ideological adversaries. This is hard to believe on two counts: first, Pacino's ingrained anti-establishment personality and mannerisms; and, second, the improbability of any lawyer as supposedly sophisticated as Arthur Kirkland becoming outraged over and over again by the familiar inequities of the criminal justice system. When Jewison and his scenarists are concentrating on the hilarious horrors in the courtroom, they are capable of a biting humor. But as soon as they are compelled to integrate their shining knight with the grotesque proceedings, they lapse into slushy rhetoric. Arthur Kirkland is simply too good and noble, and his clients are much too calculatedly pathetic to be thematically convincing.

Paradoxically, the often neglected point of view of the honest citizen victimized by a crime is treated very fleetingly in a curiously staged sequence in which Pacino is too busy talking to another lawyer to hear the plaintive wail of a victim as his mugger is lovingly coddled by the court. As with Bertrand Tavernier's *The Judge and the Assassin*, an antistate attitude tends to reduce all genuinely criminal activity to the level of an ironic metaphor.

It is not surprising therefore that Pacino's performance eventually disintegrates into self-righteous hysteria in a courtroom scene of total renunciation that has to be seen and heard to be disbelieved. Not that Pacino's non-legal relationships

Contempt of Court



Pacino vs. the criminal justice system: a knight in slushy rhetoric

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with a senile grandfather (Lee Strasberg) and a minimally contentious legal-beagle bedmate (Christine Lahti) take up any of the slack. This is another of the big-bankable-star productions that cannot seem to afford anyone else even moderately high-priced in the cast. The star is surrounded, therefore, by a collection of caricatures and nonentities, and the "system" thereby gets off the hook undeservedly. Our criminal justice system *is* a shambles, but if we are knowledgeable enough to recognize this fact, we are long past the point when a big-star grandstand play can be taken seriously as a solution.

Actually, the catastrophes in . . . *And Justice for All* seem too excessive for the sitcom structure of the narrative as a whole. Ron Leibman in *Kaz* traverses the same ground with less bombast, and with more wit and compassion, proving that the open-endedness of the television series provides a better forum for diagnosing lingering social ills than does the final-statement-at-the-fade-out obligation of a single movie.