



'The Onion Field' gives inside view of policeman's lot

Sometimes a film comes along which can be discussed without any qualifying phrases, for example, "The Onion Field" (R), written by the ex-Los Angeles cop, Joseph Wambaugh. It's a film which inspires unequivocal statements.

It is gripping. There is no denying that. No matter how many reviews you read about this film everyone will tell you it is gripping. It is an indictment of the American system of criminal justice. When two crooks are pulled over by detectives, they disarm the police and kidnap them, eventually killing one and attempting to kill the other.

When captured, the criminals readily admit their actions, yet through a Byzantine-type series of legal maneuvers, they manage to drag their case through the courts for more than seven years. They evade death row while the surviving police officer is driven to suicidal despair.

IT IS A FINE vehicle for the acting talents of several gifted men: John Savage as the tormented, guilt-ridden police officer who could not save his partner; Ted Danson as his thoughtful, bagpipe-playing partner; Franklin Jones as a petty thief who falls in with a psychotic killer; and James Woods as the killer in the most chilling performance since Richard Widmark in "Kiss of Death."

It is an inside view of the uncompromising nature of police administration with its para-military mentality of management. Finally, it is surprisingly balanced film in its realism and its presentation of human strengths and weaknesses.

With all these attributes, why, you may wonder, do you sense a certain reserve in the discussion of this film? Why not a glowing endorsement?

I have asked myself that question too, and have arrived at this conclusion. "The Onion Field" is based on a true story. It's a powerful story — tense and emotional — except for a couple of sloppy scenes at the end, which apparently are a bow to sentiment.

IT IS NO ACCIDENT that Wambaugh chose Harold Becker, a documentary filmmaker to direct the film. Essentially, it is a dramatic documentary. The power lies in the dramatic nature of the events themselves.

In many ways it is not unlike Costa-Garra's memorable film "Z," in which he chronicled the investigation and aftermath of a politically inspired assassination in Greece.

Wambaugh's drama has the same disturbing, thought-provoking effect and the same sense of relentless drive in the unfolding of events. The anguish of the police officer and the cruelty and cunning of the psychopath are secondary to this chronology in which the legal and judicial systems become the principal adversary.

With its tolerance for delays, changes, appeals, it's a system in which the wheels of justice grind not only slowly, but sometimes not at all.

This view is apparently shared by audiences, who spontaneously applaud when one character confides he would set the two killers free and put all the lawyers and judges in jail.

"The Onion Field," like "Z," is a powerful propaganda piece. It only lacks those magic moments which are art.



Seeking justice

Al Pacino (above) as trial lawyer Arthur Kirland is cited for contempt of court in this scene from "..." And Justice for All." (Below) Christine Lahti makes her film debut as attorney Gail Packer, member of the Ethics Committee investigating the courtroom antics of her lover lawyer, Pacino. The film is a Columbia Pictures release, with Jack Warden, John Forsythe and Lee Strasberg also in the cast.



Birmingham Theater announces shows



Phyllis Thaxter will co-star with Larry Gates in "The Gin Game," the opening attraction at the Birmingham Theater.

The Birmingham Theater has announced three of the four attractions that will light up its 1979-80 season.

The Pulitzer Prize-winning play "The Gin Game," with Phyllis Thaxter and Larry Gates, will open in mid-November. Agatha Christie's "The Mousetrap," which has played for 26 years in London, will be the second attraction, in January.

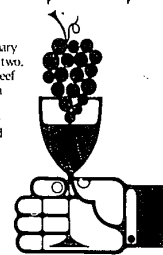
"The Elephant Man," Tony Award winner for Best Play, will follow as the third show for the season. The fourth production will be either "I Love My Wife," "Whose Life Is It Anyway?" "Bedroom Farce," or "Daisy May," a new

play with Jean Stapleton. Brochures announcing the new Birmingham Theater Club's Premiere Season went into the mail last week to subscribers from the previous season, when the theater was operated by a group of Birmingham businessmen.

The Nederlanders, who lease the Birmingham Theater, also operate the Fisher and Pine Knob Music theaters, as well as 23 other legitimate theaters around the country. More information about the Birmingham Theater season and subscription rates is available at 644-3533.

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