



the movies

Louise Snider

Dull gardner wows the world in 'Being There'

Frequently, we finish reading an absorbing novel and anticipate encountering the characters again in a movie.

Jerry Kosinski's short, provocative novel "Being There," although absorbing to read, would not seem to prompt such a reaction. Its droll humor and mocking story of a simple man's rise to prominence don't encompass the passion and adventure that are mainstays of many movies.

Its hero is as dull as can be — a retarded, middle-aged man who works as a gardener and spends all his free time watching television. That the producer, Andrew Braunsberg, recognized movie potential in this material is amazing.

Even more amazing is what the director, Hal Ashby, has wrought from Kosinski's own script. "Being There" (PG) captures the comic sensibility of the novel in one of the most disciplined, tightly controlled films ever produced.

PETER SELLERS is brilliant in his portrayal of Chance, the gardener. His calmness and restraint in developing this "underdeveloped" character demonstrate enormous acting skill and confidence. It would be so easy to succumb to temptations to broaden the comedy.

The circumstances provide ample material for elaboration into farce. Basically, the story interweaves two themes: a case of mistaken identity (the simple-minded person being mistaken for a wise man) and the effect of television on our culture.

In a cartoon that once appeared in *The New Yorker*, one person says to another: "Considering the potential of television to educate, aren't you glad it doesn't?"

"Being There" turns the joke around and shows the learning experience from television as a springboard into a society that relishes platitudes and mediocrity.

The mental deficient who makes this leap is Chance, the gardener. He wakes to his TV alarm and spends his days tending the Old Man's (his employer's) garden and watching television.

HE DOESN'T read or write. He has never left the Old Man's house, never ridden in an automobile. What little he knows, from shaking hands to doing yoga, he has learned by mimicking what he sees on the tube.

When the Old Man dies, Chance must leave. He is struck by a car, and the owner (Shirley MacLaine), the wife of a business tycoon and political kingmaker (Melvyn Douglas), takes him to her palatial home to recover.

Chance, dressed in the hand-tailored clothes of his late employer and reserved in manner, is accepted for what he appears to be — an important person. His occasional blunt remarks and laconic comments about gardening are interpreted as displays of refreshing candor and intelligent analogy.

His references to gardens are regarded as metaphors to economic swings — a fallow season followed by growth.

Thus the simple and innocent Chance becomes an economic authority and national celebrity. He communicates instantly with everyone because he speaks the language of *Everyman*, television. The black humor of "Being There" is characterized, fittingly, by the black maid who raised Chance in the Old Man's house:

"Lawdy," she says, shocked to see the retarded gardener interviewed on a talk show, "don't that prove this is a white man's world?"

what's at the movies

NEW RELEASES

ALL THAT JAZZ (R). Tour de force by writer-director Bob Fosse. Roy Scheider plays hard-driving, fast-living choreographer (Fosse) in "behind the scenes" story of unusual imagination and energy.

AMERICAN GIGOLO (R). Seamy tale about rich widows, dirty politics and a stud who gets framed for murder.

AND JUSTICE FOR ALL (R). Al Pacino is a young trial lawyer dedicated to his profession and profoundly troubled by the legal system.

APOCALYPSE NOW (R). Francis Ford Coppola's epic film of the Vietnam war interwoven with the characters and stunning impact of Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness."

AVAILANCE EXPRESS (PG). Adventure-suspense drama about KOB agent defecting to the West. Filmed in Italy and Germany; climactic scene is, you guessed it, avalanche.

BEING THERE. Peter Sellers is a TV-educated economist in satire that pokes fun at our political and social conceits.

BLACK HOLE (PG). Disney's expensive entry into sci-fi, space adventure with strong cast and action story.

CHAPTER TWO (PG). Autobiographical Neil Simon story about a man starting over after death of his wife.

CRUISING (R). Heavy leather story of police undercover agent (Al Pacino) looking for psychotic killer in homosexual community.

CUBA (R). Sean Connery and Brooke Adams in romantic adventure during last days of Batista regime in Cuba.

THE DEER HUNTER (R). An emotionally gripping and violent film about the lives of three friends from a small steeltown as they are affected by the Vietnam war.

ELECTRIC HORSEMAN (PG). Jane Fonda is a reporter and Robert Redford an ex-rodeo champion in satirical romance.

THE EUROPEANS (PG). Exquisite period film of Henry James' witty novel. Lee Remick is seductive adventures who returns to New England to seek a secure marriage.

MOVIE RATING GUIDE

- G General audiences admitted.
- PG Parental guidance suggested. All ages admitted.
- R Restricted. Adult must accompany person under 18.
- X No one under 18 admitted.



Bette Midler has the title role as a hard-rock superstar in "The Rose."

Travel film series eyes artist's Spain

The Community House Travel Film Series will take armchair travelers to Spain, 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday when photographer Franklin Carney narrates his color film, "As an Artist Sees Spain."

Tickets are available in advance at the Community House, Bates and Townsend, Birmingham.

Carney's film blends many of the masterpieces that have been painted of Spain and Spaniards with a look at modern Spain. Viewers will see how the warm colors of an artist's palette are used to paint portraits of Spanish senoritas.

The audience will view Madrid's dazzling night life, flowing fountains, busy streets and sophisticated shops. Scenes in the south of Spain show gypsy caves at Granada and a wild, uninhibited gypsy dance. Next, Alhambra with the resplendent palace and gardens of the Moorish kings is seen. This profusely flowered citadel was the home of the Moorish rulers when they dominated the country.

Dinner reservations, as well as further information on programs in the series, are available by calling the Community House, 644-5532.

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