

DINING AND ENTERTAINMENT GUIDE ON THE TOWN



Paul Newman is Essex in the enigmatic "Quintet."

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Survivors huddle in strange world without meaning

Perhaps every ambitious director has an end-of-the-world film in him. There was Bergman's "The Serpent's Egg" and Kubrick's "Dr. Strangelove." For Robert Altman, it's a film about an icy wasteland where survivors play a deadly game called "Quintet."

Altman has brought together an impressive international cast. It includes Bibi Andersson, Paul Newman, Brigitte Fossey, Fernando Rey, Vittorio Gassman and others. He has put his players, one might almost call them pawns, in a strange, oddly fascinating setting. But he has given them precious little to do.

A snow and ice-covered land extends for as far as the eye can see. The white-on-white landscape is interrupted only by the grid-like remnant of what once was a great metropolis. Now, muffled people huddle together in unheated rooms while bands of scavenging dogs devour bodies left on the streets outside.

Identification of time and place is purposefully lacking. Similarly, there are no hints of what brought the world to this bleak state. Is this an act of nature, another Ice Age? Or has mankind managed independently to alter and destroy his environment?

THE CIRCUMSTANCES are ambiguous. Altman leaves almost everything to the viewer's imagination. But without a touchstone to orient us, and without characters we care about, the film never takes hold.

Altman, who co-authored the story and script with Frank Barbydt, Patricia Resnick and Lionel Chetwynd, must take final responsibility for the lack of substance. Consequently, the film is so vague that it could mean anything or nothing. One person may view it as a medieval morality play with Newman as Everyman. Another may see it as a metaphysical exercise. A third person may discover a bogged attempt at a sci-fi thriller.

Production notes accompanying the film explain it as a consequence of the director's interest in games. Altman considers games the reflection of a civilization's culture, of its poetry and ethics and aesthetic values. This premise saddles the game of quintet with more sociological significance than it can handle.

Quintet is a simple elimination game. The stakes are life or death. This ultimate version appears to be played by an elite cadre. Stoically, they throw the dice and move their tallman-like pieces. Whatever the details may be, the object is to get the other players before they get you.

Aside from the physical violence, the game does not hold our interest. Neither do the implacable players win our sympathy or the leader dialogue our attention. Expressions such as, "Life can only be felt when death is near," and "Death is arbitrary," don't win honors for spontaneity or originality.

Altman seems to have borrowed some thoughts — from Nietzsche, from the existentialists, from sci-fi writers — but not bothered to reconcile them. Their impressive origins aren't enough to make "Quintet" anything more than a snow job.

The film is rated R.

Glimpses

NEW RELEASES

AGATHA (PG). Speculation on the 11-day disappearance of Agatha Christie is framed in handsome film with Vanessa Redgrave in title role and Dustin Hoffman as a brass reporter.

THE BRINK'S JOB (PG). William Friedkin directed this comic adventure about the big heist with Peter Falk, Peter Boyle, Warren Oates and Gena Rowlands.

CALIFORNIA SUITE (PG). Neil Simon's comedy of four episodes about guests at the Beverly Hills Hotel. Starry cast includes Jane Fonda and Walter Matthau.

EVERY WHICH WAY BUT LOOSE (PG). Country-western-style action comedy with Clint Eastwood, Sandra Locke and Clyde, the orangutan.

FAST BREAK (PG). Gabriel Kaplan is a N.Y. deli clerk named to coach a motley crew of basketball players at an obscure college.

GET OUT YOUR HANDKERCHIEFS (R). Eccentric view of male-female relations as woman's husband and lover work toward her happiness in unconventional way.

THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY (PG). Adventure caper in 1855 as three attractive crooks plan the first robbery of a moving train.

HARDCORE (R). George C. Scott is a religious, midwestern businessman who searches the porn underworld for his missing teenage daughter.

ICE CASTLES (PG). "The Other Side of the Mountain" meets "Slow Dancing in the Big City" in teen romance of skater who overcomes handicap.

INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS (PG). Remake of chilling sci-fi thriller about alien invasion in the form of plant pods.

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.

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