



LOUISE SNIDER

Sally Field excels as factory worker who fights system

Given the cash-register mentalities of producers and the escapist tastes of a sizable number of Americans, a story about union organizing activities among Southern textile workers would not seem a sure-fire bet for a movie. But that's the subject of "Norma Rae" (PG).

Pat Hingle and Barbara Baxley, playing Norma Rae's father and mother, do a fine supporting job, so does Beau Bridges as her husband. However, the center that holds it all together is Sally Field as Norma Rae. Who would ever have thought that the "flying nun" could fly so high?

Field does a magnificent job as the working-class Southern woman who becomes instrumental in the struggle to organize her plant. For once, the movies give us a flesh-and-blood character we can care about, whom we can sympathize with for her failings and admire for her strengths.

Norma Rae is a mass of contradictions, and Field makes each one of them clear. She's slobby and sexy, tough and vulnerable, smart but unlettered. Mostly though, she's a realist.

HER WHOLE FAMILY works in the mill. Her mother has become zombie-like and suffers temporary deafness from the constant din. Her father, who wasn't allowed to go on a break when he became ill, dies on the job. She wants a better life than that for her two children.

When Reuben, a union organizer for the Textile Workers of America, comes to town and starts recruiting, she signs up. Ron Leibman, who plays Reuben, is the purveyor of a performance so grating, it almost ruins the entire film. He's a wise-cracking, New York Jewish liberal who is totally obnoxious.

The conceit of the character is overwhelming. He's a salt-of-the-earth type who mixes easily with the millhands and also just happens to attend the opera, enjoy the symphony and read poetry. When he tried to raise Norma Rae's educational sights as well as social values, he starts by giving her Dylan Thomas to read.

Too often, Reuben gives the impression of speaking with a forked tongue and being condescending. It's difficult to believe that was intended in a film so one-sided in its sympathies.

In contrast, Beau Bridges looks very good as Norma Rae's husband. He makes the fellow slow, but devoted and loving. He can't keep up with his wife or understand what she's doing, but he vows to stand by her.

THE RELATIONSHIP between Norma Rae and her father, played by Pat Hingle, supplies another novel insight into family relations. Recent films have tended to show destructive relationships rather than supporting ones.

Here, the father and daughter display a comfortable sort of comradery. Their bickering and badgering are reflections of their concern for each other and not psychotic aberrations.

On the broader social plane, the events in this film suggest an earlier time slot. The working conditions seem to belong to a past era. Unfortunately, they don't.

Union struggles at J.P. Stevens' Mills testify to their contemporaneity. Congratulations go to director Martin Ritt, for tackling a controversial subject and to Sally Field for making it effective with a very warm, vital performance.

Glimpses

NEW RELEASES

AGATHA (PG). Sketchy characters but intriguing story and fine acting by Vanessa Redgrave and Dustin Hoffman carry film based on Kathleen Tynan's speculations about the 11-day disappearance of Agatha Christie.

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

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

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

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

MOVIE, MOVIE (PG). Expert and entertaining spoof of past double bill movies with George C. Scott in fight movie and Busby Berkeley-type musical.

MURDER BY DECREE (PG). Christopher Plummer and James Mason play Holmes and Watson as they stalk Jack the Ripper in foggy London.

NORMA RAE (PG). Sally Field is outstanding in contemporary story of union organizing activities in southern textile mills.

QUINTET (R). Paul Newman and Bibi Andersson play deadly game of survival in Robert Altman's icy, bizarre film.

SAME TIME, NEXT YEAR (PG). Alan Alda and a radiant Ellen Burstyn in warm, witty tale of an extramarital affair that persists for 26 years.

SUPERMAN (PG). Christopher Reeve plays Big S, Marlon Brando is father and Gene Hackman the villain in this humorous fantasy.

THE WARRIORS (R). Police and street gangs hunt down teenage gang from Coney Island as they fight their way out of Manhattan.

MOVIE RATING GUIDE

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

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