



the movies

Louise Snider

Robin Williams sinks as Popeye in garbled film

Sweethaven is a coastal village that sounds terribly nice but is just plain terrible.

The population is hostile and suspicious. The tax collector patrols the streets collecting revenues on the spot and, it seems, at will.

Should anyone balk, there's an enforcer on hand, Bluto. His towering size and strength squelch any dissent. Together, the tax collector and Bluto uphold the authority of the Commodore, a remote figure who maintains a tyrannical control over Sweethaven.

This is the situation, laced with social and political implications, into which the hero is thrust in the new feature-length film, "Popeye" (PG), a musical with a highly forgettable score by Harry Nilsson.

IT WAS DIRECTED by Robert Altman, who has never shied from social comment, whether in a stunning film like "Nashville" or a dreary exercise like "Quintet." Nor has the witty and perceptive scriptwriter, Jules Feiffer, been known to remain silent on issues.

However, when they collaborated on "Popeye," they must have been speaking different languages, because there is no theme to this that makes real sense in terms of the characters. Whatever you remember about Popeye, you can forget. This is a totally different conception of character and environment.

Popeye is not a tough, old salt but a pitiful object of derision — a short, squinty-eyed, barely articulate sailor engaged in a pathetic quest for his "poppa" who deserted him when he was 2 years old. Robin "Mark" Williams, a Bloomfield Hills son, plays Popeye. Unfortunately, his scenes must have been shot while the director was out to lunch.

Half of Williams' lines are mumbled under his breath or between clenched teeth, and at on least one occasion, he lapses from the gravelly voiced sailor to what sounds like a Jimmy Cagney imitation.

OTHERS IN the cast are Shelley Duvall, more like Olive Oyl than Olive Oyl; Paul Dooley as the selfish, hamburger-devouring Wimpy; Paul L. Smith as the nasty Bluto and Ray Walston as the Commodore.

If only they knew what they were supposed to be doing. Lines that would get laughs in other films are muffled or thrown away here, as when one character blurts, "I thoroughly engaged your enjoyment party."

All of this raises the question, Why make a film about a familiar cartoon character if your intent is to radically change the character? That's what we have in "Popeye," a generally mean-spirited and abrasive movie that not even a case of spinach can save.

what's at the movies

NEW RELEASES

AIRPLANE (PG). A picture that takes off. This spoof of all those "Airport" movies is one of the zaniest films around.

THE AWAKENING (R). Silly film about archaeologist and curse of long-dead Egyptian queen.

THE ELEPHANT MAN (PG). Largely true story of grossly deformed man rescued from sordid life by compassionate doctor. Fine acting by John Hurt, Anthony Hopkins and John Gielgud balances out directorial shortcomings.

FLASH GORDON (PG). Campy space fantasy intersperses a lot of laughs among the adventures of the clean-cut hero, all to the music of Queen.

THE GREAT SANTINI (PG). Robert Duvall as air force pilot and dominating father in strong story of family conflict and love.

HOPSCOTCH (R). Chemistry of Matthew Jackson pairing works again, but we don't see them together often enough in this halfway humorous (first half) film.

IT'S MY TURN (R). Jill Clayburgh in humorous story as independent woman (again) who falls in love with ex-baseball player during weekend in New York.

MIDDLE AGE CRAZY (R). Turnout in the family as Bruce Dern turns 40 and goes through mid-life crisis that finds him pursuing his youthful fantasies.

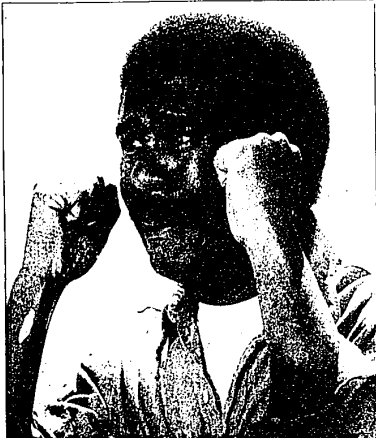
ONE TRICK PONY (R). Paul Simon's somewhat autobiographical tale of the experiences and problems of a touring rock musician after he's peaked.

ORDINARY PEOPLE (R). Robert Redford's directorial debut is a smash in this extraordinarily well-acted, moving film about a "perfect" family trying to cope with a son's mental illness.

POPEYE (PG). It will take more than spinach to save this "Popeye" from defeat brought on by slack direction, a highly forgettable musical score, and a generally mean conception of characters and situation.

MOVIE RATING GUIDE

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



Richard Pryor stars with Gene Wilder in "Stir Crazy," an off-the-wall comedy about two zany New Yorkers heading west to find fame and fortune.



Co-stars in 'Word of Honor'

Karl Malden and Rue McClanahan star in "Word of Honor," a new motion picture-for-television, which was filmed in Plymouth, Royal Oak, West Bloomfield and Bloomfield Hills. Many local professional actors have roles in the film. "Word of Honor" tells the story of an

investigative reporter (Malden) who faces a jail sentence because he refuses to disclose his source. Ms. McClanahan portrays his wife. "The CBS Tuesday Night Movies" production will be seen from 9-11 p.m. Jan. 6 on WJBK-TV, Channel 2.

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