

MOVING PICTURES



Tom Cruise plays Ron Kovic and Kyra Sedgwick is Donna in Oliver Stone's "Born on the Fourth of July."

Despite structural flaws, 'Fourth' is worth seeing

"Born on the Fourth of July" is both excellent and disturbing, a film that defies conventional grading systems. Nonetheless, this long (144 minutes), shocking film — it's as R-rated as they come — deserves top grades in every category except structure.

"Born on the Fourth" unpleasantly depicts the transformation of Ron Kovic (Tom Cruise) from a nice young, all-American kid, growing up on Long Island, to a paraplegic, Vietnam veteran protesting the war and the U.S. Marines he had once worshipped.

That radical change was chronicled in an autobiographical book of the same title by the real Ron Kovic. The screenplay was co-authored by Kovic and director Oliver Stone, best known for his Oscar-winning "Platoon."

Stone, himself twice wounded in Vietnam, again demonstrates his comprehension and sensitivity toward the numerous issues involved in that complex U.S. tragedy known as the Vietnam War.

After an "all-American" childhood — one only the '50s and early '60s could provide — Ron Kovic enlisted in the U.S. Marines. He was as gung-ho as anyone about saving our way of life from Communism. His story serves as a metaphorical outline of America after World War II.

His childhood had girls, homeruns, family and all the good stuff — stuff that never prepared Kovic for the slaughter of innocent women and children in Vietnam, for the tragedy of combat, nor for the aftermath of his paralyzing wound.

MANY MONTHS in a Bronx veterans hospital, then returning home at a time when the "greening of America" was underway, a time when veterans were regarded suspiciously and when anti-war protests were mounting — all these late '60s-early '70s social factors led to dependency and Kovic's drunken degeneration.

But Kovic emerged from those depths as an active Vietnam veteran against the war.

Reminding everyone of the appalling treatment of Vietnam veterans, as "Born on the Fourth" does so graphically, makes this film an important one. But it has other values as well.

Kovic's story tells much about our



the movies

Dan Greenberg

Vietnam tragedy and the lack of leadership America suffered in that period. Nonetheless, the film has significant structural problems.

One of its major points is the degeneration of American family structure in the past several decades. Despite the strength and tightness of the Kovic family — depicted at great length early on — it's hard to accept that they never visited their wounded son in the Bronx VA hospital. Long Island isn't that far.

According to the Universal Studio materials furnished to the press, Kovic grew up in Wisconsin. Why then this structurally devised change to Long Island which leaves viewers wondering what happened to the Kovic family.

As well, the film ends erratically with major gaps in the regeneration of Kovic's character. The last of these is a quick cut from the Republican Convention in 1972 to the Democratic one in '76.

EARLIER ON, Kovic is depicted unchanged until well into his second tour in Nam. These two glaring flaws clash with the careful fashioning of the youthful Kovic character.

There's no excuse for an accomplished filmmaker like Stone allowing such structural defects nor did he exhibit restraint in his camera work. The extensive use of facial close-ups works well in establishing the irritating realism that is so important to the film's intent. But that tends to annoy more than it should after a while.

Much worse, rapid panning of the camera as images swing wildly to project the terror of combat and the disruption of a soul sinking into hell is greatly overdone. It works, but only up to a point. Then, unlike facial close-ups, it's not disturbing intensity, it's just distracting.

Despite these complaints, "Born on the Fourth of July" ought to be required viewing. We can learn from our mistakes. It may not be conventional entertainment, but it certainly is an important social document.

A great deal of disgusting detail has been offered by the distributors on behalf of "Leatherface: Texas Chainsaw Massacre III." They seem to think that violence, pain and suffering is clever, even great filmmaking.

However much money these films may make, the producers are wrong.

WE LIVE in very brutal, turbulent times and such films reflect the culture that produces them. But the media tends to exaggerate to attract attention, thereby escalating the savagery that characterizes our century.

Anything for a buck is the real motivation for all this drive promoting "Chainsaw III." The film originally was scheduled for release last fall but its X-rating caused a delay while it was recut to gain an R.

That ought to tell you something. When it opens on Jan. 12 don't support corruption and violence; vote "N" at the box office.

STILL PLAYING:

"All Dogs Go To Heaven" (B+) (G) 90 minutes.

ALTERNATIVE VIEWING

Premiers dot DFT schedule

By John Monaghan
special writer

Like most movie fans, I await the new Detroit Film Theatre schedule with more than a little anticipation. It hangs on my refrigerator — must-see titles marked with yellow highlighters and serves as my weekend social calendar for the next four months.

This Friday, "My Left Foot" officially kicks off the season with two weekends of screenings. "Roger and Me," the controversial new film about Flint, Mich., appears in a special preview this Thursday, a day before opening in theaters statewide.

"Roger and Me" almost didn't make it to the DFT. According to Michael Moore, the film's director, General Motors executives close to the Detroit Institute of Arts tried to squelch the screening at the museum's popular film series.

The film was finally scheduled after Moore firmly committed to a personal appearance where he will answer audience questions. The most common questions lately have concerned the film's scattered chronology in telling how 30,000 GM layoffs affected Moore's hometown of Flint.

"My Left Foot" (Jan. 12-14 and 19-21) stars Daniel Day-Lewis in the true story of an Irish writer and painter Christy Brown. Stricken with

multiple sclerosis and only able to use his left leg, he learns to overcome his disability.

"YOU ARE probably thinking — like I did — that this is going to be an 'affliction of the week' movie," said DFT coordinator Elliot Wilhelm. "But it's nothing of the kind. It's about anyone who has something to say but can't find a means to express it."

Also playing for two weekends is "Story of Women" (Feb. 16-18 and 23-25). Claude Chabrol's focus on a female abortionist convicted of murder in 1943. Isabelle Huppert stars.

"Henry V," Kenneth Branagh's exciting new Shakespeare adaptation, plays Jan. 26-28.

"Mystery Train" (March 2-4) is the new film from Jim Jarmusch, the director of "Stranger Than Paradise" and "Down by Law." Its three separate stories focus on transients in a fleabag Memphis hotel. Wilhelm hopes to get Screamin' Jay Hawkins (who plays a night clerk) to perform before the film.

Made in just 15 days by New York student filmmaker Charles Lane, "Sidewalk Stories" pays tribute to silent comedians in what Wilhelm describes as "a cross between Chaplin's 'City Lights' and 'The Kid.'" It screens Feb. 2-4.

Replacing the popular "Tounee of Animation" is the "New Animation Celebration" (Feb. 9-11), including the computer-animated "Tin Toy," Bill Plympton's "25 Ways to Quit Smoking," along with TV's "The Simpsons."

"SWEETIE," an Australian film about the rivalry between a pair of very different sisters, screens April 6-8. It's the first feature by Jane Campion, called by some "the Australian David Lynch."

Fans of vintage film — in ecstasy during the wide screen tribute this past fall — will be disappointed to learn that only a small handful of older titles appear on the winter schedule.

"The Dybbuk" (March 24) is a 1937 Yiddish language film about a spirit that invades a woman on her wedding day. And 1982's "Carnival of Souls" (March 18) is a low-budget horror film shot in Kansas. Both films have already played on area screens.

Last season, DFT paid tribute to dancer Josephine Baker with a double feature of the French films, "Princess Tam Tam" (1935) and "Zou Zou" (1934). It was an amazing sell-out, prompting Wilhelm to bring them back to close the season on May 13.

SCREEN SCENE

DETROIT FILM SOCIETY, Detroit Public Library, 5201 Woodward Ave., Detroit. Call 833-4048 for information. (\$25 membership, seniors and students \$25).

"Call Her Savage" (USA — 1932), 7 p.m. Jan. 12 only. Society president Jim Limbacher introduces the film during a lecture about the steamy content of pre-Hays Code films. In this campy example, Clara Bow plays a feisty half-breed who takes Chicago by storm. A bit hard to take, but full of great moments, including what may be the movies' first scene in a transvestite club. Clips from Laurel and Hardy, W.C. Fields and Lillian Gish movies will also be screened.

"The Bear" (B) (PG) 93 minutes. Excellent nature photography but film often lacks continuity and gets pretty sappy at times.

"Blaise" (A) (R) 110 minutes. Superb Paul Newman portrayal of Louisiana Governor Earl K. Long with Lolita Davidovich excellent as stripper/girlfriend, Blaise Starr.

"Crimes and Misdemeanors" (A+) (PG-13) 100 minutes. Woody Allen at his best in this romantic comedy about family life with all its joy and sadness.

"Dad" (B) (PG) 119 minutes. Excellent acting by Jack Lemmon, Ted Danson, Zakes Mokae and Olympia Dukakis married by cliché.

"Family Business" (D-) (R) 120 minutes. Clever slide and good performances shot down by weak script about father, son and grandson in robbery business.

"The Little Mermaid" (A) (G) 89 minutes.

man who doesn't let an affliction get in the way of his writing career. Moving without getting overly schmaltzy or sentimental. Based on a true story.

HENRY FORD CENTENNIAL LIBRARY, 13671 Michigan Ave., Dearborn. Call 943-2330 for information. (Free)

"The Flying Dutchman" (USA — 1939), 7 p.m. Jan. 8. Above average Laurel and Hardy vehicle finds the boys joining the French Foreign Legion.

LIVONIA MALL CINEMA, 29415 Seven Mile, Livonia. Call 476-1166 for information. (Free)

"The Train" (USA — 1955), 10 a.m. Jan. 9. John Frankenheimer directed this action packed account of WWII French Resistance troops trying to sabotage a trainload of French art treasures en route to Germany. As part of the mall's month-long tribute to Burt Lancaster.

MICHIGAN THEATRE, 603 E. Liberty, Ann Arbor. Call 668-8397 for information. (\$4 general, \$3.25 students and seniors)

"The Rainbow" (Britain — 1989), 9:45 p.m. Jan. 8-11. Ken Russell directed this emotional tale about a

young woman (Samantha Davis) who opens up sexually and intellectually in Victorian England. Based on a D.H. Lawrence novel — a prequel to 1970's "Women in Love."

"West Side Story" (USA — 1961), 7 p.m. Jan. 9-13. The musical version of "Romeo and Juliet," the hit Broadway musical by Leonard Bernstein made a decent transition to film. Natalie Wood is beautiful but thoroughly unconvincing as Maria. Richard Beymer too clean cut as Tony. The direction (by Robert Wise) is taut, however, and you can't help but be taken in by the still-relevant story. Part of a month-long introduction to the theater's new 7mm projection and sound equipment.

"sex, lies and videotape" (USA — 1989), 10 p.m. Jan. 12 and 9:45 p.m. Jan. 13. Last year's surprise hit at Cannes is a well-written (though perhaps overrated) look at late '80s romantic confusion.

REDFORD THEATRE, 17350 Lusher, Detroit. Call 537-2560 for information. (\$2)

"Gone with the Wind" (USA — 1939), 7 p.m. Jan. 12-13. Scarlett's dress never looked redder, Tara's grounds never greener than in this enhanced color print.

VIDEO VIEWING

By Dan Greenberg
special writer

A major video presentation, "The Women of Brewster Place" (1988, color, 160 minutes), arrives on the video racks Thursday, Jan. 11. It's available in VHS and Beta with a suggested retail of \$80, so look for this "special two video pack" on the rental counters.

As a teleplay it's unrated, but I'd give it a soft R. By today's standards, however, it's probably PG-13.

Oprah Winfrey — before the diet — stars as Mattie Michael, a proud woman whose courage, spirit and will to live continually buoy her above the many misfortunes that befall her. As such, she's intended as a metaphor for black experience in America and as a testimonial to the human spirit.

Despite cruel and unnatural obstacles, black people in America continue to strive and to succeed. Despite the odds, at least some blacks get their share of the American dream. In every time and in all places, there are people who rise above grief and adversity. No matter what their status, those who endure and survive are the heroes.

In this case, the heroines, six "Women of Brewster Place" — a dead-end slum section of town — whose lives revolve around Mattie Michael.

The first third of this teleplay by Karen Hall is based on Gloria Naylor's novel and details how middle-aged Mattie came to live on Brewster Place. She had grown up on her father's southern farm. He was a pretty rigid guy who thought he was protecting his daughter when, in reality, he was repressing her.

MATTIE LEAVES home when she becomes pregnant and spends many years living with her son, Basil, and a kindly lady, Mrs. Turner, whose granddaughter, Cici (Lynn Whitfield), later turns up living in the same building on Brewster Place.

The credits are incomplete, so it's not possible to identify all the actors and actresses. One of those



The cast of "The Women of Brewster Place" includes Oprah Winfrey, Lynn Whitfield, Lonette McKee, Robin Givens, Paula Kelley, Phyllis Yvonne Stickney and Jackie.

characters, although not central to Mattie's life, is Brewster Place's busy-body, Miss Sophie, and figures significantly in the action.

Lorraine (Loretta McKeen) lives across the way with her girlfriend, played by Paula Kelly. Their unnatural relationship is, of course, upsetting and disruptive, particularly to Miss Sophie. Although her hairpiece looks absurd, her caricature of an odd, bothersome gossip is not.

The other "Women of Brewster Place" include Phyllis Yvonne Stick-

ney, playing the woman down the hall with all the children with whom she is unable to cope.

The actress Jackie is Elita May Johnson, Mattie's friend from down home who turns up in a Caddy she "borrowed" from her philandering boyfriend.

Finally, there's Melanie Browne (Robin Givens), a nice girl from a well-to-do middle-class family who has taken the name Caswara and moved to the slums of Brewster Place to be "black" and do good for

her people.

WHILE SHE has some small success in organizing a tenants' union, as Spike Lee will tell you, it takes more than good intentions to reverse the course of urban decay.

Cleely Tyson is excellent in a cameo as Melanie/Caswara's mother from the suburbs. For her, the real issue is being a mother that provides for her children.

Many elements of modern American black communities are represented in this teleplay although some much more so than others. Conscious of its absence is the radical element and it points of view.

In many ways "The Women of Brewster Place" resembles the socio-economic morality plays of the '30s, media intent on a message of love and social equality for all. Although outdated and hollow, that's appropriate since only lately have black people benefited fully from the social concerns which developed fully in the '30s.

The teleplay is episodic and while those units fit together well, they don't always flow smoothly. Eventually, all the relationships are clear, but viewers need to work at it from time to time.

ANOTHER negative, on the visual side, the production lacks the gritty realism its subject demands.

Despite these problems and the lack of radical black viewpoints, this is a touching and moving story about people worth caring for.

Mattie's voice-over statement synthesizes the most important viewpoint. "We learned that when we women came together there was a power inside us we never felt before."

That's not so much a feminist statement as a humanistic one. People have the ability to work together to create social units that are greater than the sum of their parts — now, that's something — and that something combined with excellent performance makes "The Women of Brewster Place" well worth your three hours.

Grading the movies

A+	Top marks - sure to please
A	Close behind - excellent
A-	Still in running for top honors
B+	Pretty good stuff, not perfect
B	Good
B-	Good but notable deficiencies
C+	Just a cut above average
C	Mediocre
C-	Not so hot and slipping fast
D+	The very best of the poor stuff
D	Poor
D-	It doesn't get much worse
F	Truly awful
Z	Reserved for the colossally bad
*	No advanced screening