

# Entertainment

Ethel Simmons editor/644-1100



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## Producer struggled to get film made

By Dan Greenberg  
special writer

THOSE OF US who live in the world where the decimal point is way over near the left have romanticized images of the heavy hitters that produce megabuck movies. It is refreshing and encouraging to meet a film writer-director-producer whose sensitivity, literacy and humanism rise above the megabuck psychosis.

Bud Yorkin was in town recently promoting his new movie, "Twice in a Lifetime." At a press luncheon at Dimitri's of Southfield, Yorkin spoke at great and interesting length about the problems independent filmmakers face.

"Everybody's going for the brass ring. Spielberg did the business a disservice. Now everyone thinks a movie has to gross a hundred million. If it doesn't appear to have that potential, no one will touch it," he said.

Yorkin described the great difficulties he encountered with the production of "Twice in a Lifetime," which premiered last November in New York and moved into major, nationwide distribution, opening Friday in 600 theaters around the country, the Detroit area included.

"I WAS attracted to the material because it looked like divorce in a very honest way. Colin Welland's screenplay avoids all the easy outs," he said. Yorkin began working with Welland on the screenplay in 1983, thinking its

quality would attract studio backing. "No one would touch it," Yorkin commented wryly, "because it was a movie for people over 25. I didn't think so, so I went ahead and signed Gene Hackman, Ellen Burstyn and Ann-Margaret with a 'pay or play' agreement. I thought some studio backing would be forthcoming with a cast like that."

Considering Yorkin's credits, it's hard to imagine him having so much difficulty with a property he was convinced would make a great movie. Yorkin, who started in the '50s in television, is a four-time Emmy Award winner. He worked on Fred Astaire specials, the Jack Benny shows, Martin and Lewis and the Tennessee Ernie Ford show.

He directed Frank Sinatra in "Come Blow Your Horn" and also directed "Divorce American Style" and "Start the Revolution Without Me." He was executive producer on "Blade Runner" and produced William Friedkin's "Deal of the Century."

In spite of those credits and his great success in partnership with Norman Lear on "All in the Family," "Sanford and Son," "Maude," "Good Times" and many other projects, Yorkin was disappointed that even with such stellar cast no one would back him. "But, I believed so strongly in this project that I hooked all my negatives for \$7½ million and produced the film myself," he said.

PRINCIPAL photography began



Bud Yorkin, who produced and directed "Twice in a Lifetime," believes a film's worth isn't measured in megabucks.

July 15, 1984, and was completed Sept. 13 in and around Seattle with the Washington State Film Commission cooperating tremendously. Local citizens got into the act as extras for crowd scenes and eventually got accustomed to so many celebrities in town. Footage was shot at Seattle Mariner and Seattle Seahawk games.

"By that time they were so used to us that they just ignored us in the stands," Yorkin said.

Yorkin described the filming "We

pretty much shot the film in sequence, which is unusual, because I wanted to build on ensemble acting." In "Twice in a Lifetime" the characters do grow and mature tremendously as they work together. One of the film's great attractions is the stunningly realistic and evocative interplay of family life.

Most notable in the cast is Ellen Burstyn as Kate Mackenzie, whose husband, Harry (Gene Hackman), is leaving her for another woman after

30 years of marriage. Kate must rebuild her life if she is to survive and Burstyn gives the season's most exciting performance as an individual who gathers her inner strength to fend off disaster, to survive and rebuild her life.

Burstyn gained 20 pounds, intentionally, before principal photography began and then lost it gradually as filming progressed. As her character Kate rebuilds her life, Burstyn the actress graphically, as well as psychologically, restructures herself. That devotion to craft is the hallmark of this fine production.

Burstyn is really Edna Rae Gillooly from Detroit, where she attended Cass Technical High School. Although her first performance was as a Cass Tech cheerleader, she has the distinction of winning an Oscar and a Tony in the same year, 1975, when she won an Antoinette Perry Award for her Broadway performance in "Same Time, Next Year" and an Oscar for "Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore."

WHEN THE FILM was completed, Yorkin was stunned to find that none of the studios would distribute it.

"But I was so convinced 'Twice in a Lifetime' was a good movie, that I decided to distribute it myself," he said. "Besides, the clock was running on the \$7½ million. That's a lot of interest."

Yorkin began screening the film at festivals and on college campuses, getting good reviews and good responses.

"We put together our own distribution network — and that means doing the trailers, everything, all yourself. I'm distributing it for about 18 percent, 19 percent where the studios charge 35 percent, but I don't make so many long-distance calls," he said.

"When the film opened last November in New York, I took a full page in the New York Times for 32 grand, and that's pretty scary when you only have one theater to support that expense."

"But the reviews were good and word of mouth has built the film's following so that we're now in about 150 theaters and, as of the 24th, will be in 600 theaters around the country. That's major distribution so that the cable and VCR people can look at the big grosses and feel secure they've got a financial winner."

Yorkin was asked about his next project.

"I've been working on a script about prisons for a long time. There's got to be something wrong with the whole system when you hear what goes on. I'd like to take a look at the problem, in a comic way, from a different viewpoint than the usual prison film."

"Twice in a Lifetime" opened in the Detroit area to at least one rave review (the Observer & Eccentric). It is an exciting example of film art produced by someone with talent and the courage of his convictions — Bud Yorkin.

## Simon's 'Memoirs' is warm, witty

Performances of Neil Simon's "Brighton Beach Memoirs," directed by Martin Herzer, continue through Sunday, Feb. 23, at the Birmingham Theatre. For ticket information, call the box office at 644-3533.

By Barbara Michaels  
special writer

### review

The soft sepi tones of the open set perfectly establish the mood for "Brighton Beach Memoirs." Neil Simon's warm and touching comedy family film. The current production at the Birmingham Theatre is an excellent rendition of Simon's finest play.

This autobiographical work is the most moving in Simon's large canon of his. Laughter is still in generous supply, but the sharp one-liners that mark Simon's usual witty repartee have been softened with a gentle depth of feeling.

"Brighton Beach" is narrated by 15-year-old Eugene Jerome (Mitchell

Whitfield), growing up in Brooklyn in 1937. While his parents must deal with the harsh realities of the Depression and the strain of sheltering three impoverished relatives, Eugene, newly obsessed with female anatomy, lusts after his cousin Nora and dreams of playing for the Yankees.

Eugene wins the audience immediately by confiding his innermost thoughts directly to it. As a budding writer, Eugene delights in commenting on his family's behavior. His mother, Kate (Barbara Caruso), for instance, does wondrous and incomprehensible things like whispering the names of dead diseases so God shouldn't hear her, admonishing Eugene to "write quietly" and knowing instinctively when Eugene has secreted a forbidden cookie

in his pocket or at dinner hidden his much-disliked liver under the mashed potatoes.

WHITFIELD is totally captivating as Eugene. His speech conveys just the right mix of Brooklyn-Jewish intonations and self-deprecating irony. "If only I was Italian," he laments. "All the best Yankees are Italian . . . My mother makes spaghetti with ketchup. What chance do I have?"

As Jack, the family patriarch, Victor Raider-Wexler is the epitome of a wise and loving father. While a bit brusque on the surface, he is full of good advice and tenderly fosters independent thinking. Raider-Wexler's expressive face and underlying gentleness are perfect.

Caruso ably shows the strain Kate is under as she juggles the problems of her children, husband, sister and niece — all in her charge. In the play's quieter moments though, her voice never quite softens enough, nor is she cinematic enough to be fully believable.

Mary Boucher is excellent as Kate's younger sister Blanche, struggling to find herself after six years of widowhood and lifelong dependency on others. Her kind, understanding heart reaches out to her rebellious teen-age daughter, her alcoholic neighbor, and even to the sister who has just told her off.

Allyson Rice plays Blanche's petulant daughter, Nora, longing to become a Broadway dancer instead of finishing high school. Cara Phillips is Nora's bookish younger sister, pampered and lazy because of a heart murmur. Joseph Fugua is Stanley, the older brother Eugene adores. All are fine in their roles.

Under director Martin Herzer, the comic timing is flawless and the tempo never lags. Lighting, sets, and costumes are top-notch.

There's a universal appeal to "Brighton Beach Memoirs" that allows each viewer to recognize a piece of his own family, his own adolescence.

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