The Eccentric Newspapers

Entertainment

Ethel Simmons editor/644-1100

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From stage to screen, 3 appealing new films

the movies
Dan Greenberg

Three entertaining, well-done movies adapted from stage presentations currently are playing around the metro area: "Little Shop of Horrors," "Crimes of the Heart" and "Brighton Beach Memoirs." (all PG-13).

Inevitably one hears departing viewers bemoaning how badly Hollywood mangles Broadway properties. "Crimes of the Heart" seems the focus of this complaint, in particular led by the New York Times and Time magazine. "Why can't they make a film as good as the stage show?" "Why does Hollywood always ruin books and plays?"

The questions that ought to be asked are, "Why do we expect so much of Hollywood?" and, "When will we realize that a film is a film and a book is a book and a play is a play and even two-out-of-three don't match?"

Each of those media have their own unique characteristics, their particular forms and techniques for creating images and stimulating the human imagination. When we read, our mind forms mental pictures generated by what those words represent. Just look them up in the dictionary and find out what most people agree those words mean.

The resulting images will be good, bad or mediocre, depending upon how well the author has arranged his words.

A THEATRICAL presentation is something else again, no matter whether it's an original script or adapted from a novel. When we go to the theater, we experience a live presentation, real people, really doing things before our eyes, and with very few tricks.

A motion picture is a third kind of experience, a remarkable and very effective series of mental illusions created by a complicated and interesting technology.

All three of these media have their own strengths and weaknesses. They stimulate our minds in different ways, so it's a pretty shaky proposition to expect all three to tell the same story in the same way with the same impact.

That's the end of the sermon, the point of which is, take each experience for what it is and accept the fact that plays are adapted for the *screen and not translated directly.*

"Little Shop of Horrors" complicates the matter since the current film was adapted from the Broadway show which, in turn, was based on Roger Corman's 1960 "Grade Z" movie shot in two days and a night in a storefront set left over from another movie.

Corman's effort, which featured a then-relative newcomer, Jack Nicholson, as a masochistic dental patient, has become something of a cult classic and spawned the award-winning Broadway musical which has now been adapted for the screen.

THE HORROR in the "Little Shop" is a blood-eating plant from outer space (Audrey II) brought to Mushnik's Flower Shop by a schleppy employee, Seymour (Rick Moranis). Business is bad and Mushnik (Vincent Gardenia) is about to fire Seymour and his one other employee, Audrey (Ellen Greene), a dizzy blonde with a masochistic biker-dentist boyfriend, Dr. Scrivello (Steve Martin). The plant changes all that!

Sounds like fun? Right you are, no matter how much you may have loved the Broadway show.

The same is true for "Crimes of the Heart" based on Beth Henley's Pulitzer Prize winning-play. The film features Diane Keaton, Jessica Lange and Sissy Spacek in an unconventional comedy about the three McGrath sisters and their reunion.

"Brighton Beach Memoirs" was adapted for the screen by Neil Simon from his 1983 prize-winning (two Tonys among others) Broadway success.

The film was shot on location in New York's Brighton Beach near Coney Island in Brooklyn. Various buildings there and in Queens were restored to create the film's 1937 atmosphere in this semi-autobiographical memoir of Neil Simon's adolescence.

Seymour Krelborn (Rick Moranis) talks to Audrey II, the little plant that grows as it eats people, in the film version of the hit musical "Little Shop of Horrors."

The Jerome family struggles to make ends meet as (Blythe Danner), and sons, Stanley (Brian Drillinger) and Eugene (Jonathan Silverman). There's also his widowed sister-in-law Blanche (Judith Ivey) and her two daughters, Nora (Lisa Waltz) and Laurie (Stacey Glick).

All of them struggle with life, love and the problems of growing up as the Depression winds down and World War II winds up.

PERFORMANCES ARE uniformly excellent, and among the supporting roles, Steven Hills is particularly effective as Mr. Stroheim, a pressured Prussian reduced to running a hat business in bad times. But in every role, major and minor, the actors realistically portray the pride and problems of family life.

The film is well-photographed (John Bailey — "The Big Chill" and "Ordinary People"), in soft, warm images befitting a nostalgic reminiscence, and directed with a deft touch by Gene Saks ("Barefoot in the Park," "The Odd Couple" and "Mame," among others).

Of course, the main attraction of "Brighton Beach Memoirs" is Simon's writing. His superb grip on the essentials of comedy, his fond recollections and his writing skill provide a marvelous, witty film experience.

When you are growing up did you snitch cookies from the kitchen, hide your liver under your mashed potatoes and wonder why boys and girls were different? Whether or not you saw the Broadway version, you'll love Neil Simon's answers, on the silver screen.

DAN DEAN/staff photographer

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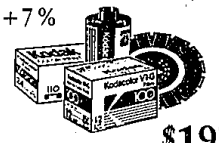

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