

# 'Citizen Cohn' portrays American monster

## Grim history repeated in HBO movie

By Dan Rice

Politics sometimes breeds monsters, suckling the ambitious on power and corruption. Among the vilest of these was Roy Marcus Cohn, the subject of the HBO original film *Citizen Cohn*, debuting Saturday, Aug. 22.

James Woods' much-publicized temperament is well-suited to the title role of the power-hungry lawyer who was a central figure in the Communist witch-hunts of the '50s. Woods almost effortlessly infuses the near-mythical beast with vim and vinegar.

Based on the book of the same name by Nicholas von Hoffman, *Citizen Cohn* begins in a hospital where Cohn lies dying of AIDS in 1986. Hallucinating from dementia, he is taunted by the ghosts of his nemeses: the electrocuted Ethel Rosenberg, whom he prosecuted for espionage; Robert Kennedy, who lost out to Cohn in a bid for the job of chief counsel to Sen. Joseph McCarthy's Communist-hunting commit-

tee; and a gory collection of those driven to suicide by his ruinous and often trumped-up prosecutions. On this final battleground, Cohn relives the backstabbing and the betrayal of friends, all without remorse. Rosenberg asks him, "You were a Jew who persecuted Jews, a homosexual who persecuted homosexuals. Why?" "I did it for the headlines," Cohn replies.

Though feared and reviled by many, Cohn maintained a large circle of influential friends, including Cardinal Spellman, gangster Carmine Galante, Norman Mailer and Barbara Walters, who was his college sweetheart. Woods was able to find positive aspects of Cohn's character to figure into the role. "One of the things I think he was legitimately for was loyalty," Woods says, "in his whatever perverse sense he had of what loyalty meant."

Despite its despicable subject, *Citizen Cohn* succeeds as a biographical drama thanks to the efforts of Woods and a fine supporting cast. Joe Don Baker reaches a new plateau with his



Lee Grant plays the mother of cold-hearted attorney Roy Cohn (James Woods) in HBO's *Citizen Cohn*.

insightful portrayal of Sen. McCarthy, and Joseph Bologna is perfect as crusading columnist Walter Winchell.

Pat Hingle proves himself the definitive movie version of FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover, and Frederic Forrest once again re-creates the blacklisted novelist Dashiell Hammett with a cool style that leaves the viewer wanting much more. The most interesting casting is Lee Grant as Cohn's mother, in that Grant herself was blacklisted in the '50s by the Un-American Activities Committee. "The irony of playing Roy Cohn's mother — when he was everything that was loathsome to me — was irresistible," she says.

Director Frank Pierson, whose writing credits include *Cool Hand Luke*, admits that some dramatic license was taken in the film but defends *Citizen Cohn* as an accurate portrait of the man. "The key to Roy Cohn for me was that deathbed moment that we have here for him in which he says, 'I had a wonderful life. I did any damn thing I wanted to, and I can't believe you let me get away with it.'"

Waxing philosophical, Pierson adds, "I believe that we give demagogues the power that they wield over us. They do not take it. There were an enormous number of people who believed sincerely in what McCarthy was doing. If you accepted his basic premise, that is that we were being sold by the brightest brains in our country, everything that he did followed as logically as dusk does the dawn."

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