

Schroder's latest is a call of the mild

By Steven Alan McGaw

Like many, Rick Schroder first read Jack London's *Call of the Wild* when he was a boy.

"I read it straight through, in a single sitting," Schroder recalls. "It was so vivid, the sights, the sounds, even the smells. It made me feel like I was in the Yukon. It's a wonderful book."

It is indeed, and one that seems a perfect source for the movies. William Wellman directed Clark Gable in the first film version of London's story in 1935, an effort that perhaps told more about Hollywood than the Yukon, but thrilled nonetheless. Charlton Heston headed the cast of a lackluster 1972 remake that offered little besides beautiful scenery.

London's evocative story of the rush for gold and the mysterious bond between a young prospector and his dog was effectively captured

in a 1976 made-for-TV film. Scripted by author James Dickey (*Deliverance*), the work walked a deliberate, delicate line between violent adventure story and philosophical remination on the natural world and man's place in it. The film was anchored by John Beck's performance as John Thornton, the young man who renounces his father's wealth to test his mettle in a new and merciless environment.

Now, Schroder plays Thornton in a new version of *Call of the Wild* airing Sunday, April 25, on CBS. Sadly, this telling of London's tale has more in common with the Heston film than the other two movies or the deceptively simple source novel.

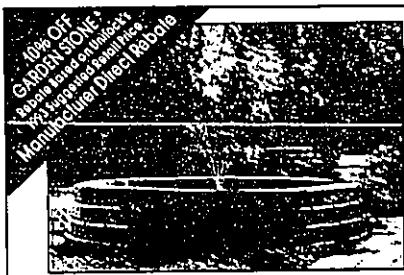
Most of the blame must be placed on Christopher Lofton's shallow screenplay. His approach to the material is reminiscent of the old *Clas-*

sics Illustrated comic books, faithfully re-creating the skeleton of the story, but denuding it of any of the excitement or emotional resonance that has brought London's novel generations of readers since its first publication in 1903.

In Lofton's version, we never understand why Thornton chooses to leave his father's handsome Seattle home and profitable lumber business, or the source of the mutual respect that emerges (all too quickly) between the impetuous John and Charlie (Gordon Tootoosis), the sagacious Indian who agrees to be his guide.

Lofton's biggest mistake is his abrupt handling of the warm, almost mystical bond that develops between John and Buck, the German shepherd he rescues from a sadistic sled driver.

Schroder struggles gamely with the role but, most of the time is simply unbelievable as the hot-headed young rebel who thinks he's prospecting for gold until he learns he's really looking for himself. His best moments come in his warm off-screen narration, using passages taken directly from London's text.



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