

Our special guest selects a video favourite, while Danny Leigh reviews this month's rental releases and overleaf, Geoffrey Macnab reviews the retail

PRIVATE VIEW

Director and scriptwriter Robert Towne looks back on the films that shaped his ideas on how to capture reality on screen

I wanna make it like real life

I saw my first movie when I was five or six years old – a World War II movie. There was a guy adrift on the ocean in a life raft and it was so real that I left my seat and walked down to the front of the auditorium and tried to walk into the screen. My mother ran down and stopped me. After that I started thinking about what I saw in the movies, what I recognised as true to life and what wasn't.

Whenever I saw a movie set in California, where I grew up, all the men would be wearing hats and coats and I would think, "Where I live they don't wear hats. This must be somebody's idea of somewhere else." Also, in restaurants, whenever they paid the bill, people said, "Keep the change." The people I knew didn't have any money. Then when husbands and wives went to bed, they slept in separate beds, and they woke up in unwrinkled pyjamas – my folks didn't even wear pyjamas. I thought, "God, when I do movies, they're gonna ask for change, and there's not gonna be a place to park in front of the Waldorf Astoria whenever you want one; hair is gonna be messy and they're gonna be in the same bed." Even though I didn't know what it meant at the time, I was unconsciously rewriting the movies I saw, even as I loved them. And I was saying, "I wanna



make it more like real life." It was the same as Mark Twain's criticism of James Fenimore Cooper's 'Leatherstocking Tales', where he proved that the Indians who missed the barge as it was going downstream had ten minutes to miss it.

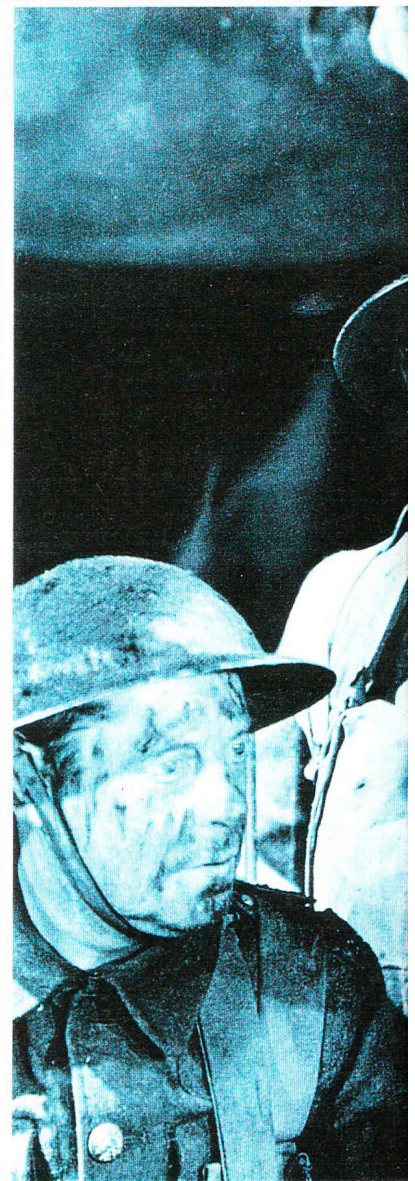
When I was a kid, there was always a Walt Disney short at the theatres, and in all of those movies, it was a working day. Mickey, Donald and Pluto would be removal men, or private detectives or

window cleaners, or they were delivering the mail, or they ran a band and played musical instruments – so they all had professions. For kids growing up at the tail end of the Depression, they were helping to answer the question we were all asking ourselves: "What do I want to be when I grow up?" At that time, when men really needed to work to survive, you were defined by your profession. I don't think I've ever done a movie that didn't centre on a protagonist's obsession with his work, its relationship to his personal life and to the outside world.

Later, I was tremendously inspired by Howard Hawks' *Sergeant York* (1941) with Gary Cooper – a film based on a true lifestory of a pacifist who enlists after being cheated out of some land and turns war hero. Gary Cooper is one of the best movie actors we have ever produced. Sometimes his acting was unconscious and sometimes it was so bad it was good. I would hate to have been one of the first directors to look at dailies of Cooper. You'd swear you were looking at one of the worst actors on the face of the earth. Yet certain moments in *Sergeant York* – particularly the scenes with his mother, that wonderful character actress Margaret Wycherly, where they are really saying to one another: "This is the reason we have to go to war" – are so true and so wrenching. You could almost paraphrase the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident." In that time and that place the audience and the film-makers shared an understanding.

Sergeant York affected me viscerally, exactly in the way that I wanted to affect others, but it wasn't aesthetically affecting – except for Cooper's acting. That had a quality of not being heard but almost of being overheard, it was so natural. It had a powerful effect on me and I've carried that feeling about acting with me ever since. The first time I saw Montgomery Clift in *Red River* (1947) I realised something different was beginning to happen in movies. Then along came Brando and Dean and it was shocking. Aesthetically it was like cleaning the palette. Suddenly reality looked more vivid.

One director who had great appeal for me was George Stevens. From his Laurel and Hardy films through to *Giant* (1956), he always had the patience to set the time and place and to move his characters through very powerful events with a real sense of their scope. American films then



Acting natural: Gary Cooper in 'Sergeant York', above and bottom left; Julien Marceau, right, produces the rabbit in the dramatic hunt scene from 'La Règle du jeu'

were operating in a tradition that goes back to Dickens and Kipling and early Faulkner – whereas the Europeans such as Ingmar Bergman had gone the way of epiphanies, of brilliant moments, and their films were very rarely as pulled together, with a plot and subplot, as American films. All these influences taught me that it's not the dialogue that's important, it's the feeling behind it. What people say is not nearly as important as the way they say it, when they say it and how they repeat it.

I was thinking of the things that weren't in movies that could make them more like real life when I came to write the script for *The Last Detail* (1973). So I was determined to include the swearing in the army. I hadn't heard it in the movies before but I knew it was important – it was an expression of impotence. These guys were going to buckle under to authority,



and their only way of defiance was to whine and swear.

When I was 28 years old, I met the man who had probably the most perfect sensibility I've ever experienced, who captured as complete a vision of the world as I could imagine. It was Jean Renoir. My script for Hal Ashby's *Shampoo* (1975) was very self consciously influenced by Renoir's *La Règle du jeu* (*The Rules of the Game*, 1939), by that willingness to take the trouble to look at a world of interacting characters in detail and to have the faith that it could be humorous and farcical and sad – not one kind of comedy or another, but a human kind of comedy. Renoir said, "Everyone has his reasons" – and that, for me, was the single most powerful observation I'd ever heard and the greatest line of advice for anyone who wants to reproduce life on screen. There's not a character who can't tell you 'why he done it'. Nobody thinks they're a villain.

Robert Towne is the director of 'Without Limits' and was talking to Hadami Ditmars. 'Sergeant York' is available on Warner Home Video; 'La Règle du jeu' is available on Connoisseur Video.



Reviews in *Monthly Film Bulletin* and *Sight and Sound* are cited in parentheses. A retail video that has previously been reviewed in the rental section will be listed only and the film review reference given. The term 'Premiere' refers to a film that has had no prior UK theatrical release and is debuting on video. □ denotes closed captioning facility

Rental

The Apostle

Robert Duvall; USA 1998; Universal; Certificate 12

Having financed *The Apostle* with \$5 million of his own money, Duvall's omnipotence on screen as the fallen preacher Sonny Dewey may not come as a surprise; that he plays it without his performance lapsing into egomaniacal posturing might. The same goes for his ability to draw out an absorbing naturalism from his cast. But his greatest achievement here is as director, inhabiting rather than merely gawking at the crazed religious subculture through which his character finds redemption. Astonishing and genuinely revelatory, in the best sense of the word. (S&S June 1998) □

The Big Swap

Niall Johnson; UK 1997; Film Four; Certificate 18

If the recent ascendancy of indie cinema has proved anything, it's that the fruits of low-budget film-making do not have to look cheap. Sadly, in the absence of any visual initiative, the financial constraints placed on this partner-swapping melodrama render an already banal storyline, pitched somewhere between voyeurism and navel-gazing, virtually unwatchable. Engaging with the ill-defined thirtysomething couples whose convoluted sex lives provide the film's premise is a challenge to begin with; being expected to do so while squinting at Johnson's ceaseless – and frequently out-of-focus – array of head shots is asking too much. (S&S June 1998)

Blues Brothers 2000

John Landis; USA 1998; Universal; Certificate PG

Landis spends much of the first 30 minutes of this belated sequel desperately attempting to lever John Goodman into the narrative in John Belushi's absence. Goodman appears understandably self-conscious as the hitherto long-lost half-brother of Elwood and Jake Blues, while Dan Aykroyd simply seems bemused by the entire enterprise. The addition of a third adult frontman and a small boy to the Blues ranks does little to dissipate the slightly macabre air surrounding proceedings, although the boisterous r'n'b numbers which punctuate the narrative are at least true to the spirit of the original. (S&S July 1998) □

Dark City

Alex Proyas; USA/Australia 1997; EV; Certificate 15

While Proyas is not the first director to push the concept of homage to its euphemistic limits, the insouciance with which he revisits his influences is *Dark City's* real point of interest. Whether the influences in question – principally Terry Gilliam, Ridley Scott, Jeunet and Caro – would be flattered by the sundry imitations here is, of course, another matter. Yet although the aesthetic is second-hand and the storyline – an amnesiac finds himself trapped in a futuristic world