Who Fired the First Shoot?

Posted April 17, 2008 | 07:19 PM (EST)

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"Working for Warner Brothers," sometime screenwriter and Brown Derby co-owner Wilson Mizner once said, "is like having sex with a porcupine: It's always a hundred pricks to one." There is no sturdier cliché in the American cultural idiom. Reigning over sound stages, stooges, and starlets, cigar chomping movie moguls, from Zukor to Zanuck, the legend holds, stuck to the cultural, political and aesthetic status quo. Messages were for Western Union.

That the times were 'a changing became apparent on February 20, 1968, according to Mark Harris, columnist and editor for Entertainment Weekly, with the announcement of the five nominees for the Academy Award for Best Picture in 1967: Bonnie and Clyde; The Graduate; In the Heat of the Night; Guess Who's Coming to Dinner; and Doctor Doolittle. These choices, Harris claims, made it "increasingly clear that something was dying and something was being created... The old and the new existed in uneasy proximity, eying each other across a red-carpeted aisle that was becoming easy to mistake for a battle line." As Arthur Penn, director of Bonnie and Clyde put it, ""It wasn't just that we were sick of the system. The system was sick of itself." With Pictures at a Revolution, Harris intends to explain how Hollywood got there.

Exquisitely detailed and exhaustively researched -- through interviews, draft screenplays, and a raft of contemporaneous reporting -- Harris peels away the onion around the genesis, production, and reaction to these films. Cotton candy at the concession stand, Pictures at a Revolution is a damn fun read. Harris' narrative is awash in stories we've never heard -- and filled with brilliant or bitchy quotations.

Bonnie and Clyde sprang from the obsession two Esquire writers, Robert Benton and David Newman, had with the French New Wave and Harris reveals that both Jean Luc-Godard and Francois Truffaut almost directed Bonnie and Clyde. He indicates that Sidney Poitier had to pass muster at a dinner with Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn prior to the filming of Guess Who's Coming to Dinner -- and slept with a gun under his pillow when In the Heat of Night moved to Dyersburg, Tennessee to give a the film a more Southern feel. He casts Rex Harrison as an egomaniac and Harrison's fourth wife, Rachel Roberts, as a bad drunk, on all fours and barking. And he rips the halos from the heads of Tracy and Hepburn.

Harris doesn't hide his view of the merits of his not-so-fab-five. Bonnie and Clyde and The Graduate are cutting-edge classics. In the Heat of the Night is a middle-brow bow to racial toleration. Guess Who's Coming to Dinner is star-turn sentimentality masquerading as social commentary. And epitomizing Old Hollywood lunacy and waste, Doctor Doolittle does little more than talk to the animals. A better title for the book might be "Two and a Half Pictures at a Revolution and Two Troglodytes."

Harris argues that Penn, Warren Beatty, Mike Nichols and Norman Jewison, aided and abetted by Buck Henry, Robert Towne, and Hal Ashby, -- brought a new sensibility to the screen. The new guard struggled against cultural and commercial conservatism -- and made compromises. Penn excised a ménage a trois involving Bonnie, Clyde, and their driver; Buck Henry came perilously close to removing "plastics" from The Graduate. As he watched the beginning of Bonnie and Clyde, with its muffled dialogue and blurred old photographs, Jack Warner exploded: "What the hell was that?" It's an homage to Warner Brothers gangster movies, Penn replied. "What the fuck's an homage?", the old man asked.

Despite all his anecdotes, Harris does not adequately answer the fundamental questions raised by his book. Was there really a revolution? Hasn't Hollywood always chased cultural change and reached for "relevance"? Were these five films really just a cross-section of the business, from the hoary road show show musical to the indie darlings? How was 1967 different from, say, 1947, when the socially progressive Gentleman's Agreement beat out The Bishop's Wife, Crossfire, Great Expectations, and Miracle on 34th Street, for Best Picture? If a "New Hollywood" had been born, what changed? Harris struggles to argue that "the revolution" was "impelled by the demands of an audience" that by 1967 had "made its wishes for a new world of American movies so clear that the studios had no choice but to submit to them". But it's fair to ask whether this revolution, like so many others throughout history, was in truth sparked by a search for room at the top.

In explaining the revolution, Harris doesn't move much beyond what we already know. By 1967, the studios were under siege. Desperate to differentiate their product from television, they seemed to offer little more than size, scope, and spectacle, without commercial interruption. Challenged by "the new morality" and foreign films like Blow Up, the Hollywood Production Code was on life support. It would not have survived, even if Bonnie and Clyde and The Graduate had never been made. And the movie moguls were either dead, disssed, or conglomerated.

In essence, we believe, Pictures at a Revolution works best as a prequel to Peter Biskind's Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex, Drugs, and Rock and Roll Generation Saved Hollywood. With an analysis of the rise of auteur filmmakers (Coppola, Friedkin, Scorsese, Spielberg, and Lucas) and a new breed of actors (DeNiro, Pacino, and Nicholson), Biskind makes a strong case that Hollywood experienced the '60s and the '70s, with breakthroughs in technique, subject matter, and style. In this stylistically similar work, while he sets it up, Harris doesn't quite connect the dots to demonstrate that his pictures paved the way for the real
revolution.

Today the '60s and '70s remain an endless source of fascination for Baby Boomers, their offspring, and the current crop of college kids. It's what helps the Rolling Stones keep on rolling. Reflecting on criticism of Guess Who's Coming to Dinner, director Stanley Kramer acknowledged that "Everything was happening too fast in the '60s. Too fast for me." Although they weren't the first films to "exploit the fracture" between kids and their parents, Bonnie and Clyde and The Graduate got the picture and Harris is right, of course, to call attention to their importance.

Forty years later, soaring production costs, narcissists and know-nothings in positions of power, and the conflict between art and commerce continue to bedevil the motion picture industry. The moguls are no longer the problem. It's the Internet, stupid. Pictures at a Revolution makes us wonder what the auteurs of the '60s and '70s would do. We suspect they'd come up with something. Something interesting and innovative, if not quite revolutionary. Something that would make Jack Warner say, "What the fuck is that?".

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I was an avid reader of Glenn Altschuler's articles in the NY Times Sunday Education sections when he was a regular columnist with them, and I've always...