

"Life at the Top"

Life at the Top, directed by Ted Kotcheff and starring Laurence Harvey, Jean Simmons, and Honor Blackman. Now being shown nightly at the Wealthy Theater at 7:00 and 9:00. Student admission is \$1.25.

Of the two best films I have seen in the Grand Rapids area this school year, *The Pawnbroker* and *Life at the Top*, I regretfully favor *Life at the Top*. I say regretfully because there is something in me that would like to believe the life of the pawnbroker, but realizes that life is not like that, at the top or anywhere else. *The Pawnbroker*, a story of the small and the poor, is at bottom not as true as *Life at the Top*, the story of the big and the rich.

Sequel to earlier Lampton movie

Life at the Top is the second chapter of the life and loves of the amoral Joe Lampton. The public first met ambitious Lampton in the 1958 *Room at the Top*. Joe Lampton was the grammar-school boy who unscrupulously moved himself into English high society by marrying a local industrialist's daughter, after she was pregnant by him. In marrying both Susan Brown and a position in her father's factory, Lampton gave up the woman he loved, who consequently committed suicide. *Room at the Top* ends with Joe Lampton beat-up, disillusioned, and hoping to find his way out of the moral slaughterhouse he created.

Ten years later Joe Lampton, the poor Yorkshire newspaper-boy, has achieved *Life at the Top*. Susan's father, Abe Zed Brown, has secured Joe's future with an executive position at his textile mill and a home in the suburbs. He drives the best cars and sends his children to the best schools, but lacks that dimension which English teachers like to call *meaning*. The desire for wealth and position which pushed him from the bottom has left him cold at the top. His fellow workers respect not his business ability, but rather his amorous ability, knowing what brought him to the top. "It's not what you expected, Joe?" his wife asks him. She suggests that he make his life more exciting by having a colored girl or going to Tahiti. "And what would we do all day in the sun," Joe replies, "talk to each other?" Lampton runs off to London to have an affair with a television announcer, Nora Hauxley, leaving his home in Warley, A Z Brown, and his family behind. He is not able to get a new job on his own and realizes that Nora and her arty friends have nothing to offer either. Susan comes to London to urge her husband home and asks, "What do you really want?" To which Joe answers, "It's not a case of what I want, don't you see, it's a question of what I'll settle for." Lampton returns to Warley and resumes his life at the top.

Successor to kitchen sink realism

The Jack Clayton-directed *Room at the Top* marked the renaissance of modern British cinema. Its "kitchen sink" realism has set its mark on all important British film since. This English "kitchen sink" realism was Italian neo-realism (*Bicycle Thief*, *Open City*) stripped of sentimentality. Ted Kotcheff's *Life at the Top* proves to be the worthy successor to Clayton's *Room at the Top*. Kotcheff, a Canadian television veteran, has maintained Clayton's crisp factuality. Kotcheff has made the mistake, however, of trying to bring too much action into an actionless story. Caught in a moral cataclysm, the characters in *Life at the Top* live in complete passivity. Kotcheff brings camera tricks to enliven this essentially stagnant situation. Fast zooms and pans are not only offensive to the eye but detract from the mood of detached-passivism. Some of the director's devices are stimulating and effective, such as the narrator technique at the wool market or the scene where Lampton's daughter plays blind-man's-bluff while his wife and best friend have an affair; but one cannot help but think that the story would have more impact without any plot-quickening devices than with some good and some bad.

The power of *Life at the Top* lies not so much in its direction as in the screenplay and acting. Mordecai Richler, another Canadian, has provided a screenplay which is an asset rather than a detriment to the acting. The traditional stereotypes of English high-society conversion are only a backdrop to the meaty words of Lampton.

Cast performs with precision

The cast of Jean Simmons, Honor Blackman, and Michael Craig perform their roles with precision and credibility, all the more emphasizing one of the most memorable characters on film, Joe Lampton. Laurence Harvey has slipped back into this role as easily as he did seven years ago. By his second skin-tight portrayal of Joe Lampton, Laurence Harvey has made up for the seven years of acting sins in between.

Joe Lampton is destined to become one of the lasting characters of screen along with such others as Quinn's Zampano, Dean's Jim Stark, and Bogart's Rick. Just as Dreiser's Clyde Griffiths stands for the twentieth-century man-on-the-move, Lampton represents the present day. Laurence Harvey has succeeded in transforming the amoral man into a sympathetic character. Lampton does nothing to deserve our sympathy. He sublimates his conscience to his pocketbook; he does not help those around him. He is a Clyde Griffiths who gets rewards instead of death. What makes Lampton different from Griffiths? It is not so much Lampton's character as Laurence Harvey's characterization. By his rare performance Harvey has succeeded in re-creating the modern dilemma, the man who is equally good and evil. Harvey has so successfully created an amoral character that there are no criteria by which to judge him.

Good actors not required for good film

Allow me a brief digression on the nature of films and acting. A faculty member once remarked to me that he would not go to see *Zorba the Greek* because Anthony Quinn was not acting, he was just being what he is. Such a criticism may be legitimate in the theater, but not in film. A director does not need good actors to create a good film. *Battleship Potemkin* and *Los Olvidados* are examples of non-acting film greats. If an actor has one talent and the director uses that one talent, the film will not suffer. Brigitte Bardot is great when she plays Brigitte Bardot, for who could play her better? A similar accusation could be lodged against Laurence Harvey. Some say Laurence Harvey is Joe Lampton, and therefore he isn't acting. Even if Harvey were not an actor and could never play Hamlet (which is not yet settled), he would still be responsible for some of the finest moments in British cinema.

But why do I choose to rate *Life at the Top* against a film as good as *The Pawnbroker*? The excellence of *The Pawnbroker* will serve to demonstrate the excellence of *Life at the Top*. They have little in common except that they both deal with the "meaning of existence." *The Pawnbroker* is a fantasy. It tells the audience what it wants to hear. It pits the audience's sadism and voyeurism against its guilt. After shuddering at the tortures, gasping at the open sex, the public can rejoice in Nazerman's catharsis. The audience returns home shocked but re-persuaded that love is the answer to man's ills. This is at best a phony and temporary catharsis. *The Pawnbroker* was rigged to make the audience feel that way and the shock-induced effect will last no longer than the morning paper. Both the plot and solution are such desirable delusions that they convince the viewer into thinking he is seeing the real thing.

Banality of life at the top

Life at the Top is painfully un-fantastical. High-society Warley has none of the glamor of the slums. Incidents, affairs, and quarrels pass as days on a calendar. Sex at the top has lost its appeal to the characters as well as the audience. Kotcheff acts out his tragedy as if the audience weren't even there. There is none of *la dolce vita* in *Life at the Top*. (Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* was essentially unreal in this aspect also. In conforming to the public stereotype of the decadent rich, he presented a very narrow view of the upper classes.) Lampton comes to the not-so-profound solution that the best man can do is settle for what he can get. In Dreiser's day they killed the amoral man, today we make him go on living. The corrosive effects of *Life at the Top* last longer than any of *The Pawnbroker's* shockpower.

So what, the *Pawnbroker* fan says, isn't it better to attempt at a solution and fail than succeed without a solution? To this I answer: Isn't it better to portray a problem without solution than to manufacture a false one? The *Pawnbroker* fan might still argue that the unreal is often more poignant than the real; to which I can only reply that I have not found it to be so in the case of these two films.

Alfred Knopf, the publisher, once said that he no longer looks for books that say anything, but just for those with good technique. *Life at the Top* has captured this modern literary inadequacy in that it has nothing to say and says it very well. Like Joe Lampton this is what the present public must settle for. There is, of course, still hope for another filmic chapter in the life of Joe Lampton or even a movie of *The Pawnbroker at the Top*.