

Film Analysis

Alice's Restaurant

By Paul Schrader

The tragedy of Arthur Penn's *Alice's Restaurant* is not that it is misconceived—many other talented film-makers have let their imaginations outrun their abilities—but that the film's misconception is of such *minor consequence*. *Alice's Restaurant* is merely mediocre.

When a great director is given his freedom, the least we can expect is a great failure, with pretentiousness, banality, and brilliance all fighting for precedence.

But the overriding feature of *Alice's Restaurant* is its lackluster quality.

Pale Imitations

It contains only pale imitations of the themes, characterizations, and events which made Penn's best films singularly outstanding (*Left-Handed Gun*, *Bonnie and Clyde*) and his lesser films consistently exciting (*The Miracle Worker*, *Mickey One*, *The Chase*).

Alice's Restaurant's ups and downs are petty; there is little evidence of a major talent gone wrong, although that may actually be the case.

Total Control

Ironically, *Alice's Restaurant* is the first film over which Penn has had total control, from original conception and scripting to direction and editing. After the phenomenal success of *Bonnie and Clyde*, Penn could have made any film he desired. He was one of the most praised of American directors.

After only five films, Penn was already the subject of a book of detailed analysis (By Robin Wood for Studio Vista)—an unprecedented honor. With characteristic courageousness Penn chose to tackle a subject about which he knew relatively little and which had been con-

Courageousness

Penn's courageousness did not stop at the subject matter of his film. He chose to disregard almost every tenet which had made him one of the best directors in America, and likewise violated the precepts his admirers had laid out for him to follow.

Penn is one of the most perceptive portrayals of the violent nature of the American personality. His films had always dealt with violence as a means of communication—yet *Alice's Restaurant* is about the difficulties of living a non-violent life.

Great Films

His great films were American genre pieces (*Left-Handed Gun*—Western; *Bonnie and Clyde*—Gangster; *The Miracle Worker*—Biography), his weaker films dealt with contemporary themes (*Mickey One*, *The Chase*), yet he chose in *Alice's Restaurant* to handle the most contemporary of themes.

His best characters have been masculine folk figures: Paul Newman, Marlon Brando, Warren Beatty. Scrawny, white-skinned, long-haired Arlo Guthrie simply does not fit the mold.

One of Penn's greatest gifts is the ability to bring out the best in good people (actors, cameramen, editors): yet, with the exception of his cutter, Dede Allen, Penn chose in *Alice's Restaurant* to work with amateurs and near-amateurs. This may have been an overreaction on Penn's part against the actors and writers who received so much credit for *Bonnie and Clyde*.

In addition, Penn chose to deal with a culture he learned to understand, by his own admission, only as the filming progressed.

Complex Themes

Penn also saddled himself with a medley of complex themes rarely handled in American films. *Alice's Restaurant* is the first film in which the principals went back to reenact a well-known event which had happened several years before. (With

the possible exception of the *March of Time* newsreels, in which the chronological feedback was ignored rather than manipulated.)

Alice's Restaurant also deals with several degrees of fantasy. Guthrie's *Alice's Restaurant Massacre* was a whimsical elaboration of his own past, and Penn could have chosen to either take Arlo's word for it, return to the original reality of the event, or go on to greater fantasies.

Lack of Excitement

Then why, if Penn brought so much courage and experimentation to his subject, did the result lack even the basic excitement of a great failure? The answer, painfully enough, may be that Penn's aspirations were greater than either his imagination or talent, and that, stripped of his vital, talented side-kicks, he

little touches as well as the major ones. After Arlo refuses to screw with a barely teen-aged groupie, who claims Arlo will someday be "an album," the audience may begin to doubt this long-haired lad's masculinity. Therewith follows a scene where Arlo has sex on the grass with an unknown girl, presumably to validate his virility.

This is reminiscent of the peculiarly unsatisfying sex scenes of *Bonnie and Clyde*.

In fact, *Alice's Restaurant* bears resemblance to Penn's earlier work primarily in its weaknesses—it is an anthology of Penn Low Spots. The short scene with the sex-bent teeny-bopper is one of the best scenes of the film, yet this facile social comment is the sort of thing better directors would throw away, and its memorability reinforces the fact of *Alice's Restaurant's* failure to create a deeper level of comment.



was left to flounder in the mire of his intentions. The results of *Alice's Restaurant* show that that may have been Penn's greatest struggle.

Alice's Restaurant spends its time trying to find its own level. It is full of ups and downs, neither of which is timed well enough to be satisfying. Cryptic scenes are inserted to little effect, potentially good scenes are held overlong, low spots are played for full emphasis, and the plot shifts so randomly that often the audience is interested in different characters than the film is.

Little Interest

The entire plot device about the addict-bike rider passes with little interest until Penn tries to canonize his character with an overlong, overly sober graveside scene.

Penn's confusion is noticeable in the

The thwarted sex episode with Arlo and the aging nightclub owner is equally awkward.

Also, midway in the film a hippie with a mule makes a pun about "getting his ass over the border." In other Penn films this would have been corn to reveal a character; here it's just corn.

Weak

In the experimental areas, where Penn's talent could have shown most brightly, he looks the weakest.

Arlo's reenactment of the deathbed ordeal with his father is pathetic, for more reasons than the poor acting and dialogue. Art is theoretically supposed to magnify life, bringing emphasis to those events which symbolically carry weight. Yet Arlo's scenes with Woody are infinitely more dull and less touching in *Alice's Restaurant* than they must have been in real life. Penn was looking the wrong way through the artist's telescope—

things got smaller. The father-son relationship has always been crucial in Penn's films, and the Arlo-Woody scenes again show Penn doing the worst job on the things which are important to him.

The quality of Penn's direction also effects Arlo's original song. *Alice's Restaurant Massacre* conjures up more vivid visual impressions than Penn is able to provide on film. Penn's treatment of the draft induction center is ludicrous—Arlo didn't feel bound by the actual event; why should Penn be bound to Arlo's song-oriented fantasy?

Final Shot

The final shot of the film is a long tracking shot of Alice standing in front of her church. The shot is obviously intended to convey great significance, like the long last shot of the film version of *Playboy of the Western World*, but all it conveys is a sense of Penn's desperation. Penn is trying to pressure the audience into an emotional climax when it hasn't been set up for a climax. As in political double-talk, a great deal of weight and argument are employed to support a premise which is blatantly untrue (in this case, that the final scene has great significance). In this respect *Alice's Restaurant* is similar to Robert Bresson's misconceived film, *Les Dames de Bois de Boulogne* (except that Bresson's subject matter was not of his own choosing).

Bresson injected moments of stylistic climax without thematic substantiation because he wanted to play with the hackneyed movie plot he had been given. Penn inserts bogus climaxes because he the fact that he was never able to create them thematically.

Important

Alice's Restaurant is nonetheless an important film, however, not only because it was made by a man who has proven himself to be a major force in American films, but also because it deals courageously with a subject major American film-makers have shied away from (unless you still want to consider Otto Preminger a major film-maker after *Skidoo*).

As co-producer Joe Manduke commented, "*Alice's Restaurant* will to some extent show a new way of life to some people in America who didn't know about it yet."

The pity is that, given the fact that *Alice's Restaurant* was misconceived, Penn's follies and excesses did not take on greater proportions than they did. Although Penn's talent is substantial, as he has shown, his courage, his aspirations, and desire to go it alone are even greater. For the time being, Arthur Penn (unlike certain directors whose imaginations outrun their talents) is a director whose aspirations outrun both his talent and imagination.

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