

MOVIES

PAUL SCHRADER

"The Learning Tree." Written, produced and directed by Gordon Parks. Starring Kyle Johnson, Alex Clarke, Estelle Evans, and Dana Elcar. Photographed by Burnett Guffey. A Warner Bros.-Seven Arts production.

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The greatest thing about Gordon Parks' "The Learning Tree" is, ironically, that it isn't a very great film. "The Learning Tree" gives the viewer breathing room, an opportunity to both take it and leave it. And considering the film's subject matter, that is a sizable achievement.

Gordon Parks is the first Negro director to receive funding from a major Hollywood studio—and that is a heck of a situation to put anybody in. Every civil rights and political group had definite ideas about the sort of film Hollywood's first black director should make, and not all the panacea professionals of filmdom could satisfy such divergent pressure groups. Parks could have protected himself by putting everyone else on the defensive, by making an unrelenting anti-white film, shrugging his shoulders and saying, "That's the way it is, man." Instead Parks chose to make a small, personal and totally vulnerable film which could completely please no one but himself, but which might satisfy others to varying degrees.

Surprisingly enough Parks' strategem succeeds. There is a great deal of dislike for "The Learning Tree" among young blacks and whites, but, as far as I can tell, no great animosity. Audiences recognize that the sentimentality is sincere, the hokum is genuine and are willing to let Parks lord over his small piece of emotional territory, taking from him only what they desire. Parks' sensibility is so non-aggressive, so genuine, and so simple that viewers have no qualms about learning from him. The failure of "The Learning Tree" does not interfere with the success of its parts.

Had Parks been a deeper or more hard-headed man, his sensibility might have been effective in the unity he intended, and not the parts people take from it. But when Gordon Parks bares his big black soul, for the most part we find only old film cliches. "The Learning Tree" is an aging man's reminiscence about his Kansas boyhood; it is nostalgia infused only with recollection. It seems that Parks spent his boyhood acting out certain cinematic conventions. His experiences included "poetic" romps in slow-motion through the summer grass, static Life Magazine (Parks' old employer) travelogue scenes of the picturesque countryside, meetings with a pot-bellied redneck sheriff and losing his virginity in a deserted shack.

Parks told a UCLA audience, "This is the story of my boyhood, and this is the way it was." I don't believe it. I don't think the young Gordon Parks experienced the Olympia Beer commercial concept of romance, or thought of his life as intervals between major events. This is what happens when an aging man limits his intelligence and perception so that he can (he thinks) see through his eyes as he did as a youth. For the most part Parks' nostalgia is meaningless—unless you want to know that old blacks have the same fantasies about their childhood as do old whites. Parks cannot expect the cliches to come alive because they are painted in blackface.

But Gordon Parks can also offer the viewer rare bits of nostalgia that no white director has ever felt. The action during the first killing in the stream, in the outdoor boxing match, and in the brothel (with an uncredited song by Jimmy Rushing) display a perception foreign to American films. The value of "The Learning Tree" is that Parks is honest, not necessarily to his past, but to his nostalgia, a nostalgia which occasionally touches the storehouse of untapped black film experiences.

Parks has permitted his film intermittent success and for this reason many viewers may get more out of "The Learning Tree" than Parks put in. Unlike "Easy Rider," another film which pioneers in subject matter, Parks does not push the viewer into the "for us or against us" corner. In "Easy Rider" Dennis Hopper went so hard for the kill, and failed, that I think he will soon lose even the small successes. The "Easy Rider" game is only for great artists and great fools; and Gordon Parks is neither.

