

Ya gotta have a gimmick

'Horses': the pain of life

Movie Review
by KELLEY BAKER

They Shoot Horses Don't They? is well worth the acclaim and the nine Academy Award nominations it has received (most often, A.A. nominations can be taken as a reverse index of a movie's value).

Based on a 1935 novel of the same name by Horace McCoy, *Horses* literally drags you down into the depths of the Depression. The setting is a 1932 Hollywood dance marathon — the couple that danced the longest won a \$1500 prize — and these contests went on for months. Contestants were fed seven times a day and were given a ten minute rest period every two hours.

The film follows the dancers through their months of agony to crushing despair. In a "New York Times" interview, Director Sydney Pollack said he originally hadn't wanted to direct the film. "I don't really believe there's no justice. I'm not an existentialist, I'm an optimist. I don't find man's situation hopeless. Basically the film shows a girl who blows her brains out because she can't bear the pain of living. Painful as life is, I can't imagine getting out of it."

"Horses" is excellent therapy for those with a Mary Poppins view of the world and those who think that *The Sound of Music* is one of the best films they've ever seen. Charles

Champlin of the Los Angeles Times criticized the film, saying that "Beri beri and pellagra are laugh riots compared to 'They Shoot Horses Don't They?'" And, in the "National Review", Stanley Kaufman accused Pollack of

turning a pretty grim novel into a grimly pretty picture.

But, as Pollack peels back the layers of skin, he reveals the strengths and dignity of the contestants as well as the cruelty and brutality of the marathons. Underlying the

brutality of the dance contests is the brutality of war as well as the de-sensitizing effects and strengths that both evoke.

Pollack commented that "There is a poverty of spirit today as well as a poverty of body. Human nature doesn't change. The elements in human nature that produced the dance marathon still exist. That kind of exploitation still goes on. But today it isn't expressed in the form of a dance marathon."

Gig Young has shed the handsome image of old and practically wallows in his role as the promoter-emcee of the contest. His performance is excellent as is Suzannah York's as an English actress who is in the contest to be "discovered" by Hollywood producers.

Jane Fonda has already won the New York Film Critics Award for her part as a midwestern girl who has come to California because it's a better place to starve than

Texas has now been nominated for an Academy Award.

There are some weak moments in the film: (1) the flash-forwards intrude on the action and are unnecessary for foreshadowing or to build suspense and (2) the opening slow motion shots of the boy and the horse look like a TV commercial for some shampoo — the closer he gets . . .

But these are small blemishes compared with the power of expression and beauty of presentation of *They Shoot Horses Don't They?* Yowza, yowza, yowza, and the marathon of life goes on.

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