

bart becker

Slaughterhouse 5— Billy Pilgrim's time travels

Grah your socks, troops, 'cause the screen adaptation of Kurt Vonnegut Jr.'s best-selling novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a good one. And that's saying a lot for an American-made film these days.

The media mixing invites comment, of course. And the film is true to the novel in spirit, if not always in exact transcription.

Vonnegut's tale of Billy Pilgrim, who has become unstuck in time, is made to be handled on film. The time-traveling that Billy does is handled easily by flashback and forward technique.

Michael Sacks as Billy Pilgrim does a good job portraying the starry-eyed,

bashful time traveler. Because he moves back and forth in time, it appears to him as another perceivable dimension. He sees his whole life as easily as the rest of us might see from here to the corner.

He moves essentially among three times and places: World War II, where he, a prisoner of war, lives through the fire-bombing of Dresden; as a middle-aged, successful businessman with a fat wife and daughter and a hoodlum teenage son; and on the planet Tralfamadore where he is kept in a domed, zoo-like atmosphere as an Earth specimen for the Tralfamadorians to ogle.

Each time, Sacks does Billy up just fine.

As the shy, naive Chaplain's assistant at Dresden, Billy always trusts in the goodness of man. Other actors also turn in good performances here, too.

Eugene Roche as Edgar Derby, the kindly old vocational school teacher turned enlisted man turned elected leader of the captured American troops, is the epitome of kindly-old, etc. And Ron Liebman, as Paul Lazzaro, the All-American soldier who swears he'll kill Billy—and finally does—does a credible job.

In his middle-aged time Billy is accompanied by his wife (Sharon Gans). She is a fat girl who Billy married because it meant a good house and income. Since he'd been able to see his whole life through time travel anyway, he knew it would at least be bearable.

The Tralfamadorians are invisible in the film; they exist in another dimension. But they are vocal. The Tralfamadorian spokesman is constantly curious as to whether "you're ready to mate now?"

Billy is kept in a dome supplied with furnishings the Tralfamadorians swiped from a Sears warehouse. He later is joined by a starlet (Valerie Perrine). The film eventually ends as they have a baby and the cyanide atmosphere of Tralfamadore explodes into fireworks.

The point of the film, and the book, is the inevitability of time. Billy speaks to his Tralfamadorian guide:

"How—how does the Universe end?" Billy says.

"We blow it up, experimenting with new fuels for our flying saucers. A Tralfamadorian test pilot panics and pushes the wrong button, and the whole universe disappears."

"If you know this," Billy said, "isn't there some way you can prevent it? Can't you keep the pilot from pressing the button?"

"He has always pressed it, and he always will. We always let him, we always have let him, and we always

will let him. The moment is structured that way."

The movie also preserves the wit and humor of Vonnegut's book and concocts some moments of its own. When Billy's wife is driving madly to him after he has been hospitalized after an airplane accident, she wreaks highway havoc the likes of which hasn't been seen since W.C. Fields led his troop of demolition drivers onto the screen.

Thanks to pretty good direction by George Roy Hill and really good editing by Dede Allen, the movie ranks in the vaguely-defined upper echelon of recent American films like *Catch 22* and *A Clockwork Orange*.

It has more in common with *Catch 22*, of course, both films are based on philosophically left-wing novels. Both have World War II as a major setting, and the heroes of both films are "Innocents."

All in all, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a fine film and a fine experience. It's too bad Yankee ingenuity can't tackle more film projects with as much success.

The Front Page will run every night this week at Howell Theater.

Tuesday's foreign film is *Love Affair* from Yugoslavia.

On Friday, Oct. 27, the Union Special Films committee will meet at 7 p.m. in the Union to select films for the spring semester. Committee chairman Dan Ladely has invited anyone interested in film to attend the meeting.

Suggestions for possible films to be shown will be accepted. The committee plans to book as many films as possible for the spring session.

Wednesday and Thursday nights the Coffee House series presents *White Eyes in the Union*. *White Eyes*, a rock group, played here last year and apparently impressed enough people to be asked back. It's free, too.

The Weekend Film will be that struggle of man versus rats, *Willard*.



fine arts

'Fat City'— bums, boxing in California

Review by Roy Baldwin

We drive in past the city limits sign of Stockton, California, and see how the golden dream of the golden state lies in urban-renewal construction chaos. It's morning.

Kris Kristofferson sings "Help Me Make It Through the Night," and Stockton's bums blink in astonishment at the bright California proof of having made it through to one more day of growing older.

Billy Tully wakes up in his flop house room in his undershorts with his arm around his pillow, searches through a maze of schnappes bottles for a match, and does not find one.

No doubt about it, John Huston knows how to direct an opening scene.

The bums of Stockton who wait in the world outside Billy's window are all the bums one has ever seen. They are the real stars of this movie. We wonder at them—how did they get so old and their faces so like parchment?

Billy Tully ends the slow, frantic, losing search for fire, puts on his pants, strides out into the California sunshine and starts to tell the answer.

Fat City succeeds despite some clumsy filmwork by director Huston. It succeeds because of the characters, who move in their world with a strange grace that recalls scenes from *Five Easy Pieces* and *The Last Picture Show*.

Fat City is the story of how Billy Tully becomes acquainted with death.

Stacy Keach is magnificent and graceful as the washed-up boxer just short of his thirtieth birthday, bearing the scars of a thousand illegal eye cuts and the burden of slowly dying with drink and despair.

Jeff Bridges, who you will remember from *Last Picture Show*, is believable as the eighteen-year old discovered by Billy at the local YMCA, but he's in danger of becoming typecast in this kind of role.

Susan Tyrell steals most of her scenes as Ona, Billy's girlfriend, perpetually drunk and unkempt. Picture Martha Raye of, say, 1943, getting a chance to play a serious role. She's excellent.

The best scenes take place in the dingy bars where the two meet and pursue their clumsy love. Ona and Billy fall drunkenly in love, although due to the heavy-handed and stupid censoring of the film by either the State Theater or their distributing company, you would hardly guess it.

How ridiculous to show a preview of some Swedish flick replete with naked breasts and everything and then X out the only bedroom scene in *Fat City*. It would seem as if Lincoln theaters have a long way to come in showing common respect for the movies they play.

In spite of all this, Ona and Billy are elegant in their total drunkenness. They toast each other over cream sherry and fall out the door.

But enough of love. *Fat City* is about boxing and dreams and death—about the city of dreams that Billy begins to realize he will never reach. Keach's amazing performance shows a real understanding of and sympathy for the types that inhabit the world of the small-time ring. To them boxing is romance and invincibility and manhood.

In their world they are knights-errant; they reduce the world and their dead-end lives to the simple metaphors of the ring. But Billy finds that all struggle, however poetic, is futile.

Shortly before the metaphorical end of his life Billy, drunk again, sits in a recreation hall and observes, "Before you get rollin', your life makes a bee line for the grave."

It is his epitaph, and a fitting conclusion for the end of a marvelous movie.

Novice actors mar 'Front Page' opening

Review by Bruce Borin

The Front Page opened the University theatre's season Friday night with all the noise and intensity of a three ring circus. The problem with a three ring circus is that nothing has your full attention. There seemed to be no real focus to any moment of the show; nothing ever built to a climax.

The first act moved quickly and occasionally you could even understand some words. The action of this act is concerned with some 1924 reporters, bored with having to wait up all night to cover the hanging of a young Bolshevik murderer, on edge because nothing is happening, bickering among themselves and having some fun talking a buffoon cop into running out after hamburgers for them.

The whole act, however, is played with as much intensity as the scene where Molly, "the tart," flings herself out of a window, in a very heart-rending attempt to save her young man's life. Her noble act is lost in a frenzy of inconsequential activity.

I couldn't figure out how the director, Orlin Larson, intended us to react to his characters. At times they were straight from vaudeville, and instead of sincere, roguish, blood and guts newsmen, we ended up with almost cartoon versions of Daymon Runyon.

I don't want to criticize Larson's interpretation because I'm not really sure what it was. There was no consistency of style among the actors at all.

The actors were, for the most part, young and inexperienced. They seemed to have no idea of the beats or rhythm of the play. I would guess what Larson did was to try and find at least one playable quality in each actor with no regard whatsoever for a uniform style.

Perhaps if some work had been done to achieve unity among the green actors they would have been better able to handle this remarkably ageless play without seeming to lampoon it. The work of Glenn Cox, Donovan Diez and Christine Qualset was commendable.

The actor who brought it all together was Bill Wallis as Walter Burns. Wallis displayed control, stage presence and a very dynamic, honest characterization. Burns is talked about and eluded to all through the first half of the play, and when finally seen, Wallis is everything he was cracked up to be and more.

At last here was someone I cared about, even though he was every inch a bastard.

As *Front Page* settles into its week long run, perhaps the actors will calm down, learn to play their audience and make their points.