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'Alice' portrays feminism of a 1940, not 1970 vintage

Alice Doesn't Live Here Any More is a modern day woman's picture (i.e., by the new definition not necessarily for women but about women) created by people who felt it was time to start making films with females in them again. For the past two years everybody has been complaining about the absence of meaningful women's roles in films and getting agreeing responses of "ain't it the truth" accompanied by a shrug of the shoulders. I'm surprised it took this long for someone to do something about it.

Thankfully, Alice has been done well and with brains, and it is the best film yet to come out of this young new year. As such, it is liberating. It isn't adding anything to the history of women in movies but it's certainly adding to their history of the past few years. It's almost like breaking new ground again.

The movie was directed by Martin Scorsese, who is, next to the already prodigious Francis Ford Coppola, probably the most talented of the young, film-schooled directors. His last film was the brilliant *Mean Streets*, a movie I was lucky to catch before it breezed through Lincoln on a wing (and without a prayer) last spring. That film was a deeply felt, searing, nearly hallucinatory view of entrapment in the underworld of New York City's Little Italy.

Now Scorsese has left the suffocating, deep red and black world of *Mean Streets* for the bright outdoors of the American southwest to capture Alice Hyatt's search for self. It is a much less personal vision, not only because *Mean Streets* was Scorsese's boyhood home, but because Alice was certainly influenced by its star, Ellen Burstyn, and a group of talented women film-makers who worked on the film.

At the beginning of the movie, Alice and her family—a hot-tempered, but basically unexciting husband (Billy Green Bush) and a spoiled, smart-alec son (Alfred Lutter)—are living in semi-contentment in New Mexico. The film's plot is tripped when her husband is killed in a traffic accident and Alice is left with little security, financial or otherwise, and her troublesome, moppet son.

And so the two of them, with little motivation but the need to move, pack up their station wagon and hit the road. It's an idea not at all uncommon in films, and in this respect *Alice* is similar in feeling to Paul Mazursky's recent movie, *Harry and Tonto*. Both films mix comedy and romance with their seriousness, and both have the same warm, bittersweet feeling to them.

But Mazursky is a romantic and Scorsese is anything but. *Alice* has a deeper desperation running through it that *Harry and Tonto* hasn't. Burstyn doesn't give an angry performance yet there is a sense of searing frustration in the role. Art Carney's old man had a captivating personality and found people easy to handle while Burstyn's mid-30s woman has trouble with everyone from the word go. If Harry was on one final fling in search of a way of winding down in style, Alice is in a desperate struggle to find a second chance.

Her goal is to return to Monterey California,

her girlhood home and a long lost symbol of the happy independent days when she was a singer.

Her pilgrimage is being constantly interrupted in places like Phoenix and Tucson where she, out of necessity, must stop to earn money to keep the two of them going. The kid evaporates away in dingy motels out of sheer boredom while mom gets a new dress and hairdo to help her find a job (She ends up looking like a classy, yet slightly overripe hooker). She prefers one as a nightclub singer, but will settle for less. She ends up as a frantic, pink-uniformed waitress in a hectic, little cowboy restaurant called Mel and Ruby's Cafe, as Joan Crawford did in the quintessential 40s women's picture, *Mildred Pierce* (1948).

Her salvation (and if there is one, this is the movie's big cop-out) comes in the form of congenial, bearded rancher Kris Kristofferson who asks her, please, to accept his offer of love and let him take her to Monterey. She accepts, tearfully. Kiss. End of movie.

After some embarrassingly constructed scenes at the start of the film (when Alice is still with her husband) are out of the way, the acting here is uncommonly fine. Burstyn sacrifices star quality for believability in her character (she looks like she gained weight for the role). Alfred Lutter, as her bored, jittery son, is effectively captivating and irritating at the same time.

greg lukow
key grip

Harvey Keitel, who starred in *Mean Streets*, has only a small part here but it is as stunning a 15 minutes of acting as you will see. He plays a wide-eyed, Arizona dude with a boyish charm that coaxes Burstyn into a brief affair before she sees what she's gotten herself into. In the movie's most gripping scene, he throws a terrifying, possessive tantrum, threatens to beat her if she ever crosses him, and then asks her what time he should pick her up that night. Her petrified, trembling look tells more about this woman than any other moment in the film.

There are scenes in *Alice* that we've not come across in a long, long time. Women crying on each others shoulders, Alice pouring out her heart to a friend, and the film's classic buddy-buddy moment, when Alice and her two waitress friends drop their work and clasp each other in sisterly rapport while Mel and his costumers clamor and howl in the background.

Yet despite its feminism, *Alice* doesn't go all the way. Scorsese and his screenwriter, Robert Getchell, are closer to the women's weepers of the 40s than the women's liberation of the 70s. Alice still doesn't know how to live without a man. When she agrees to accompany Kristofferson on her terms, she has escaped sacrificing her womanhood, yet it is a Hollywood Happy Ending *par excellence*.

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