



Photos courtesy of Plaza 4 Theaters

Schoolkids learn to cover their heads in case of atomic bombs.

"Atomic Cafe" exposes secure illusion

By Eric Peterson

"Atomic Cafe," a skillfully funny film that started Friday, is stitched together from old newsreels and Army training films on nuclear weapons. Produced and directed by Kevin Rafferty, Jayne Loader and Pierce Rafferty, it has elements of both "Hiroshima Von Amour," which considered suffering in a stark and sensitive way, and "Leave it to Beaver," the show which symbolizes the awful complacency of the '50s.

In fact, Hugh Beaumont, the late actor who played the all-wise but stupid father, Ward Cleaver in that series,



Movie Review

appears in this film to soothe people's fears about nuclear disaster. "Risk is part of the pattern of daily life," he reasons. Why, you can be hurt in any number of ways. You can fall and hit your head in the shower.

Near the start of "Atomic Cafe," we see some of the footage taken right after Hiroshima was hit. The excruciating effect is heightened by the voice-overs in which Americans make light of the incident. This part of the film is necessary background against which to set the illusion of security that Americans tried to preserve in the years following Hiroshima, an illusion which is central to the film.

All this was a plan to relieve Americans of their fears about nuclear apocalypse. Ward Cleaver, former Nebraska Governor Val Peterson and Bert the Turtle ("Duck! and cover!" he tells school kids) were all called into service. In an Army propaganda film, a "chaplain" with hilariously wooden acting, comforts scared soldiers who are about to watch a test blast by describing the aesthetic aspect of the mushroom cloud. "Watched from a safe distance, this explosion is probably one of the most beautiful things ever seen by man."

The trivialization of nuclear weapons was, of course, a way of not thinking about them. The film's title comes

from a diner of that name, and there are various popular songs about atomic-powered lovers and an "atomic cocktail" that fizzes over. Various models of bomb shelters are advertised. One of those ("subversive") Columbia professors steps in with the truth: (In a nuclear blast, bomb shelters would be centers of incineration), but the U.S. government continued to insist on the efficacy of children ducking under their school desks.

The saddest part of the film begins with faintly humorous reminders of the McCarthy Redbaiting era. FBI agents poke around Whittaker Chamber's pumpkin patch, producing a microfilm which Nixon brandishes, proclaiming, "I have in my hand a microfilm . . ." (No documentarist was there the day in West Virginia when McCarthy began his reign of innuendo with the lie, ("I have in my hand a list . . ."))

But the tone immediately becomes sober when we recognize Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, executed for espionage in 1953. Heartbreaking music plays as their death is described. The observer tells of how Ethel Rosenberg took several minutes to Jie, then righteously adds that she had some accounting to do with God. The segment finished with a scene of row upon row of suburban houses, the "little boxes made of ticky-tacky" to which the Rosenbergs were sacrificed.

This consumer-products world has a very dark underside. A priest, deadly serious, advises getting a gun, in case people try to break into your bomb shelter just before the bomb hits.

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