

Arts & Entertainment

'Tin Men': tribute to Americana

By Charles Lieurance
Senior Reporter

"Tin Men" is possibly the finest tribute to American myopia to grace the big screen since Griffith's "Birth of a Nation."

Barry Levinson, who proved his mastery of period pieces as the director of "Diner," here recreates what is essentially the same time period but from a different point of view entirely.

"Diner" was a small film with fragile equilibrium that dealt with ordinary people who had no idea who they were. "Tin Men" is a big picture, and it's built like a fortress. Its concerns are massive and its characters are self-assured Don Quixotes whose illusions, though destructive and politically repellent, eventually win us over.

Bill Babowski (Richard Dreyfuss) and Tilly (Danny DeVito) sell aluminum siding just before the rules of the salesman's game became regulated by the federal government. They are snake-oil salesmen who have turned their unscrupulousness into an integral part of the Horatio Alger tale. The screen hasn't seen such likable criminals since "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid."

But what makes Tilly and Babowski so proud is not that they are perpetrating cons on gullible people, but that these cons and scams are legal and within the dynamic rules of

capitalism. Tilly and Babowski are social Darwinists without even knowing it. In America if you're a sucker who's got a big enough piece of the American dream to afford a nice suburban home, it's perfectly acceptable for a man with wit and cunning to come along and scrape a little of that dream off the top. That's America for Tilly and Babowski.

Levinson has managed to capture a truly bizarre moment in American history. It's such a small moment that there's really nothing to be said about it in the history books. Its implications are great but abstract. It's the early '60s and, at least for ordinary Americans (especially aluminum-siding salesmen, apparently), the shape of the American dream is changing. Before that it was relatively simple.

Babowski and Tilly are drowning in its awesome simplicity. They are the living components of Hazel Motes' quote in Flannery O'Connor's "Wiseblood": "A man with a good car don't need no justification." Levinson fills the frame with layer upon layer of shining automobile fins and the plot of the film hinges on a grudge Tilly holds against Babowski after Babowski smashes into his new Cadillac.

Babowski is a swinger, the romantic philosopher of "Tin Men." His vision of the world of the aluminum-siding salesman borders on the

poetic and visionary.

His lifestyle encompasses all the "good" things in America: disposable income, disposable women and a disposable disposition. Even as his world is drastically changing and his vision is being proven utterly flawed, he is envisioning the new world.

Tilly, on the other hand, is more affected by the amorphousness of the Dream. He's no poet. He got a wife and home just to say he had them but the life he prefers is much smaller. He'd rather be out

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with the boys than at home with his wife (played diligently by Barbara Hershey), and he obviously prefers the small, mobile confines of his new Cadillac to the stifling stasis of the home.

Levinson's film is about the arrhythmia in the heart of the American machine, the little hitches in the smooth movement of the gears and wheels. The government has decided to regulate the Tin Men's flimflam by defending the sucker against the wiles of men like Tilly and Babowski. On a street full of huge finned cars, a Volkswagen pops up. Male codes of honor are broken for the sake of business. As the culmination of the grudge between Tilly and Babowski, Babowski sleeps with Tilly's wife

and eventually steals her away from him. Suddenly all the very real windmills that the two are jousting with turn to air.

Tilly loses his wife, his car, his home and his job to this arrhythmia. Babowski loses his job, the subject of all his poetry and vision, to it.

Neither man really has anything left, but they are so unaffected it's hysterical. This movie is made all the sadder by the lack of tears in it. By the end of it, Tilly and Babowski are just walking blindly into the new America where they can't be boys anymore.

And "Tin Men" is about boys, about their petty little problems, their silly wars, their wandering discussions about nothing in particular (although every word is uttered as if it affects the course of humanity) and their absolute inability to deal with outrageousness of fortune in anything but an outrageous manner.

"Tin Men" is a beautiful film. I'd be hard-pressed to come up with another that cares enough to create each and every character with three dimensions. The leisure-time conversations of the Tin Men about everything from breads to "Bonanza" are priceless. Each of the Tin Men has a mannerism that prevents him from becoming a throwaway. One is obsessed with the unreality of certain TV shows. Another can't stop using the word "irritated."

Dreyfuss and DeVito are so likable that it's alarming, especially considering how really slimy their characters are. It's unbelievable the empathy one can muster for these two.

Hershey, like most of the women in the movie, doesn't really have much to do. Levinson's men are finely crafted, and his women are automatons at the mercy of their boy games. The men are everywhere at once, careening through life irresponsibly and the women are seated in neat rows doing docile secretarial tasks.

The only real flaw in the film was Levinson's choice of music. The Fine Young Cannibals as an early '60s bar band is jarring, and their music doesn't really accompany Tilly and Babowski's life well. There is too much emphasis on rock and soul music and not enough on the pop schlock characters like this would most likely listen to. When the Sinatra tune finally appears, it does more to enhance the mood of the film than all the other songs combined.

But this is a flaw so small that it hardly counts. "Tin Men" takes on a huge chunk of Americana and handles it like it happened yesterday. For most directors a scope this large would become unwieldy and lose its momentum halfway through. Levinson treats it like child's play. "Tin Men" is now showing at the Cinema Twin.

PTL 'Pearlygate' scandal continues...

I decided to write another column about the PTL scandal for two reasons. Reason one — everywhere I go people keep asking me, "I'm dying to read your next column about Jim and Tammy. When are you going to respond?"

"There won't be another column about PTL," I've told people as disappointment surfaces on their faces. "I've drained the issue. Jim got laid and Tammy's a junkie. And how many jokes can I make about her eyelashes? Sorry. It's time to move on to something else."



Harrah's Hollywood
by Scott Harrah

But on Friday, I realized that I had to write about Miss Tarantula Lashes once more when I picked up the Lincoln Journal and read the latest piece of scandal about the "Pearlygate" controversy.

Here's the second reason for another tale of trash about the Bakkers. You asked for it, readers:

The Washington Post reported in a national wire story that Tammy Faye had a platonic "fling" with Gary S. Paxton, the Grammy award-winning singer-songwriter of classic hits like "Alley Oop" and "Monster Mash."

Her husband, Jim, who resigned from the PTL ministry two weeks ago after the world discovered that he had an illicit sexual tryst with church secretary Jessica Hahn in a seedy

Florida hotel in 1980, said he was aware of the affair and seduced Hahn because he wanted to make Tammy Faye jealous.

Paxton's ex-wife Karen told the story to the media because she felt that Jim was trying to protect Tammy Faye by taking all the blame for his sex session with Hahn.

"I kept all this to myself for years because I didn't want Christians to turn away from PTL," she said. "Jim is covering up for Tammy Faye, which is fine. That's the kind of man he is. But they (Jim and Paxton) were both destroyed by Tammy's transgressions. I don't want to hurt Tammy Faye, but why should Jim and Gary be scapegoats?"

Paxton and Tammy Faye spent nights alone during studio recording sessions, she said. Paxton was producing her albums in the late '70s and trying to transform the walking cosmetic counter into a singer "who nobody would laugh at." She said he liked to call Tammy Faye "Ladybird."

Paxton, 48, said that he and the Christian superstar "were just friends, never more than that," but revealed that their relationship sometimes became quite passionate. "You're with somebody a lot and become too close a friend sometimes, then realize you're too close and quit."

Linda Wilson, Tammy Faye's personal secretary, said she warned the Queen of Maybelline about having "even an affair of the heart."

"We talked about her and Gary," Wilson said. "I said to her, 'Tammy, a relationship with the Lord comes first, then your relationship with your husband.'"

Jim banned Tammy Faye's alleged

lover from the PTL show even after Paxton wrote the evangelist an eight-page letter begging for forgiveness.

So there you have it — the latest installment in the scandal that seems to get more interesting and sensational every week. When will it end?

Many people have lambasted me for making a mockery of Tammy Faye in the past year, but what they fail to realize is that I love her. Why else would I spend so much time writing column after column about her hideous make-up, her dingbat quotes and her overall hyperbolic nature? To me, Tammy Faye is the source of a new cult following, second only to Evita Peron's and the worshippers of "The Rocky Horror Picture Show." She has no idea how many secular fans used to tune in to PTL and "Tammy's House Party" to be thrilled by all the melodrama, high camp, poor taste and hilarious tragedy her presence offered.

If anything, she'll be remembered for her aphorisms and epigrams. "Girls, my make-up's running, but that's what bein' a woman is all about," she once said. Not even Oscar Wilde could top that.

Or how about her insight. In her autobiography "I Gotta Be Me," Tammy Faye shows that under all that caked-on goop, she's really a thinking woman who knows how to tell a philosophical tale. Her poor dog Chi Chi kept taking a leak on the drapes in her living room, she wrote, so she prayed to God and asked him for help. Alas, the pooch croaked and Tammy Faye was heartbroken, but she said she soon realized that Chi Chi's death was God's way of solving her problem. And Tammy Faye has had dry drapes ever since.

As for her politics, well... she's obviously too dumb to know any better. She can't help it that she was once stuck in a money hungry, deceptive sham masquerading under the ruse of religious evangelism. She just wanted pretty clothes and someone to hear her sing. "Honey, I never had any talent as a singer, but I let the Lord into my life and he made me one," she once told PTL viewers.

God also told her that it's okay to wear monolithic amounts of make-up. She once said that she thought cosmetics were sinful and that God would strike her down if she wore them, but one night he came to her and told her that make-up was a Christian thing to wear. She started the Tammy Faye Cosmetics line soon afterward.

And now she's more famous than ever. She and Jim are both on the covers of Time and Newsweek and even are the butt of a new string of jokes. Plus, PTL officials have decided to pay them twice as much as they made when they were part of the ministry because "without Jim and Tammy Faye, there would be no PTL."

Her story now needs to be told in a "made for TV" movie. I plan to write it. I think I'll call it "On the Brink of a Miracle: The Tragic Story of Jim and Tammy."

I already know who I want to cast. I want Charo to play Tammy Faye. Imagine her delivering Tammy's lines: "Oh, Jeem, have choo seen my meenk — I theenk ze dog has peesed on it!" And I want Don Knotts to play Jim.

What about the theme song for the film, you ask? How about if I get Gary Paxton, the wicked soul, to remake "Monster Mash," but retit it "Eyelash Mash." Charo might actually have a hit



Tammy "Ladybird" Bakker if she sang it.

I know I've been cruel, PTL followers, but I can't resist ridiculing Tammy Faye. I worship her and I'm bummed out that she won't be on anymore. I just hope I can console the Christian crowd that believes in her benevolence. "You are a cold and insensitive being," one incensed high school girl told me in a letter. "Tammy Faye does excellent work and has helped many people. You have no right to judge people you don't know... You've probably never seen the Bakker's program... You've probably only seen them while flipping the channels looking for the Playboy Channel!"

Not exactly... But I can't wait for Hugh Hefner to announce that he plans to publish Tammy Faye's nude photos in Playboy. We'll have to wait and see if she ever had any taken.

Exhibit of art chairman Ruffo at Sheldon April 7 - May 24

The Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery will present the exhibition, "Joseph M. Ruffo: A Graphic Image" from Tuesday through May 24. This is the first public opportunity to view, in depth, works by Joseph M. Ruffo since his appointment in 1984 as chairman of UNL's art department. The exhibition of more than 60

works includes examples of drawings, etchings, lithographs, silk-screens and collagraphs. It is a survey exhibition of Ruffo's expressions from an early-1965 simple image to his current works which combine and culminate the best qualities of graphic techniques and visual ideas. "These accomplished works strike

a balance between the tangible and the formal qualities of visual abstract structure. The artist takes the visual world as a starting point and he transposes the reality of the seen into an abstracted reality of a graphic image," said George W. Neuberger, director of the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and curator of the

exhibition. Joseph M. Ruffo is a graduate of the Pratt Institute in New York and received the first Fulbright Grant in the Visual Arts to Brazil in 1963. In 1965, Ruffo received his master of fine arts degree from Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan. Before working at UNL, Ruffo was acting

dean of the College of Humanities and Fine Arts at the University of Northern Iowa and chairman of the Division of Fine Arts at Barry College in Florida. Ruffo has received many awards for printmaking and is on numerous art-advisory committees as well as being a private design consultant.