

CHANNEL 4 Film Reviews

Hal Ashby



Hal Ashby directs Ruth Gordon in HAROLD AND MAUDE.

Harold And Maude

92 minutes

United States (1971)

15

starring Bud Cort , Ruth Gordon , Cyril Cusack , Vivian Pickles , Charles Tyner , Ellen Geers

written by Colin Higgins

directed by Hal Ashby

The unlikely story of the love affair between a death-obsessed adolescent and a septuagenarian free spirit has long been a cult movie par excellence

Director Hal Ashby (*The Last Detail*, *Being There*, *Shampoo*) was perhaps the most opaque of the movie brats - never one to take the easy route in his life, career or in his storytelling.

Certainly *Harold And Maude* would be an obtuse choice by most directors' standards. Despite or because of this, many connoisseurs of the era's cinema rank Ashby's film up there with *The Graduate* and *M*A*S*H* for its brilliant black humour, absurdist, anti-authoritarian intelligence and counterculture whimsical wit.

Harold (Cort) is a hearse-driving 19-year-old introvert rich kid, dominated by his overbearing mother (Pickles) and with a penchant for serial fake suicides. "Tell me Harold, how many of these, er, suicides have you performed?" asks his therapist. Maude (Gordon), by contrast, is a car-thieving 79-year-old free spirit and anarchist, with a joie de vivre that borders on the implausible, but which is incredibly infectious - even contagious. The two meet up at the funerals each habitually attends: Maude in the spirit of life affirmation, Harold presumably to nurture his deathwish.

They form an unlikely but visceral friendship, while Harold deters the girls his mother sets up for him with ever-more-grisly suicide scenarios - which culminate in a spectacular hari-kiri at his palatial house. Maude meanwhile, introduces him to the banjo and takes him on car theft

sprees. Together they bait traffic cops and liberate saplings from local towns for transplant back in the countryside.

If on first appearance this is a hippie movie, with noses thumbed at the usual bogey figures - clergy, cops, the military (Harold has a possibly insane one-armed soldier uncle) - before long it becomes apparent the film is something else. Maude is clearly Harold's 'therapist' - and her soulful, devil-may-care regimen gradually loosens his joints and breathes life into him. But the two are also soulmates, and eventually even, erm, lovers.

This too-cute collocation may irritate some, but the film is intelligent, hilarious and finally very touching. It's beautifully put together by Ashby, shot in muted, autumnal colours, and with hardly another soul to be seen along the blustery Californian vistas where Harold and Maude conduct their courtship and his spiritual awakening. Its off-kilter humanity and deftness of touch makes it a spiritual ancestor to *The Royal Tenenbaums* - and you can bet Wes Anderson is an Ashby fan in general, and a Harold And Maude fan in particular.

Verdict

Insane and whimsical by turn, and very much a product of its time. But Harold And Maude's black humour and absurdist, life-affirming credo make it a joy to watch. Not to be missed.

Being There

130 minutes

United States (1979)

12

starring Shirley MacLaine , Peter Sellers , Jack Warden , Richard A Dysart , Richard Basehart , Melvyn Douglas

written by Jerzy Kosinski

directed by Hal Ashby

An Oscar-nominated Peter Sellers shines in his penultimate film. A simpleton gardener gets mistaken for a guru and finds himself imparting wisdom to the American nation

Think of Peter Sellers and you'll most likely think of Inspector Clouseau. But Sellers, whose Pink Panther films formed just a small part of an impressive film career, is arguably at his best in Hal Ashby's comedy, tagged 'A Story Of Chance'.

Sellers is Chance, the simple gardener who has always lived within the confines of his master's mansion. He knows only about his plants, the television and his daily routine. But when his master dies, and he's cast onto the streets of New York, chance throws him (literally) into the path of another rich gent, one Benjamin Turnbull Rand (Oscar winner Douglas). His smart attire and strange speech, mannered like that of a wealthy man, lead to a misunderstanding in which Chance's new benefactor believes he is 'Chauncey Gardner', adviser to the great and good.

Of course, Chance/Chauncey's simple utterings make great TV soundbites, and soon he's dining with the President (Warden) and being seduced by Rand's wife Eve (MacLaine).

Sellers claimed the hardest aspect of his role was making such limited utterings as "Life is a state of mind" sound both profound (to his adoring followers) and moronic (to the viewer).

You only have to look at Tom Hanks in *Forrest Gump* to realise it's quite hard to do both.

There's also much to appreciate in Ashby's film aside from Sellers' exceptional performance. With the benefit of hindsight, his view of a TV-obsessed society seems remarkably prescient, and the film suffers from none of the sentimentality that might afflict such subject matter now. The ending may puzzle you, but *Being There* will certainly linger in your mind long after you've watched it.

Verdict

Peter Sellers' peculiar talents are ideally suited to the role of the idiot savant, and despite the Oscar going to co-star Douglas, his is the standout performance of a fascinating, funny film.

The Last Detail**103 minutes****United States (1973)****18**

starring Jack Nicholson , Clifton James , Randy Quaid , Carol Kane , Michael Moriarty , Otis Young

written by Robert Towne

directed by Hal Ashby

Brilliantly cynical black comedy. Nicholson won his first Oscar for his no-holds barred portrayal of a filthy mouthed sailor who ensures Randy Quaid has the time of his life on his way to jail

Having already gained a reputation as one of America's boldest directors with the legendary perverse Harold And Maude, Ashby delivered this expletive splattered, bitter black comedy, in the process transforming Jack Nicholson from counter culture hero to bona fide star.

'Bad Ass' Budduskey (Nicholson) and Mulhall (Young) are a couple of navy grunts charged with delivering fresh faced Meadows (Quaid) to prison where he's to serve eight years for stealing forty bucks. But far from following procedure Budduskey and Mulhall ensure Meadows pops his cherry, gets royally plastered and enjoys the favours of New York's hipperati at a Greenwich Village chant-in.

Ashby's no-frills direction perfectly suits this base, brutal but brilliantly conceived trio and Nicholson lets loose hail after hail of vicious invective with visible relish. Released in 1973 when Vietnam was still fresh in the American psyche, the film's shot through with a profound sense of disillusion and Towne's bilious rant of a script proves that the devil is indeed in the detail. When a straight-laced bartender threatens to fetch the shore patrol, Nicholson lowers his eyes and grimly announces: "I am the motherfucking shore patrol."

Nicholson would spend most of the seventies consolidating his reputation as a deranged sociopath and while he's given more polished performances, few match the furious energy he displays here.

8 Million Ways to Die**115 minutes****United States (1986)****18**

starring Andy Garcia , Jeff Bridges , Rosanna Arquette , Alexandra Paul , Randy Brooks , Lisa Sloan

written by Lawrence Block , David Lee Henry , Oliver Stone , Robert Towne

directed by Hal Ashby

The decline of Ashby's career is one of the saddest in film-making. After a string of fiercely independent and intelligent films (Harold and Maude, Being There), he was reduced to making this derivative thriller which shows little of the Ashby touch. Bridges is the cop in disgrace after having ruthlessly killed a suspect, Arquette the prostitute who seeks his help. There is little here to fire the imagination, but as the film was taken away from Ashby by the studio for re-editing (although Ashby won an Oscar for editing In the Heat of the Night) it is hard to know who's to blame.

Coming Home**126 minutes****United States (1978)****18**

starring Robert Carradine , Jon Voight , Jane Fonda , Bruce Dern , Robert Ginty , Penelope Milford

written by Waldo Salt , Robert C Jones

directed by Hal Ashby

Ashby (director of Shampoo), here soft soaps the issue of Vietnam and America's part in it by giving us merely a diluted and melodramatic love story. Fonda is the straight-laced and politically naive wife of war hero Dern who volunteers her services at a local hospital for veterans. When she meets and falls in love with angry paraplegic Voight, her views about the war and the treatment of its victims (including Voight) change dramatically. The film is saved only by fine (and surprisingly unстереotypical) performances from Fonda and Voight, who both took Oscars that year.

Bound for Glory

147 minutes

United States (1976)

PG

starring Gail Strickland , Ronny Cox , David Carradine , Melinda Dillon , John Lehne , Ji-Tu Cumbuka

written by Robert Getchell

directed by Hal Ashby

Award-winning biopic of the folk musician Woody Guthrie. Set in America during the Great Depression in the 30s, the film looks through slightly rose-tinted lenses at the events that shaped Guthrie's socialist beliefs and inspired his songs. Carradine's portrayal of the singer is so downbeat that he's virtually comatose on occasion, but this is balanced out by some splendidly quirky character acting from the supporting cast. However, the major strengths of the movie are Haskell Wexler's cinematography and the score (both of which deservedly picked up Oscars): they create a sense of time and place perfectly in accord with the story.

Shampoo

United States (1975)

Starring Warren Beatty, Carrie Fisher, Julie Christie

Written by Robert Towne

Directed By Hal Ashby

Warren Beatty stars in and co-wrote this 70s tale of an LA hairdresser whose ambition to set up his own business is secondary to his desire to bed as many of his female customers as possible

There was a hell of a lot more to the 70s than disco, Evel Knievel and Space Dust. The best American movies since the 1930s were made during the decade when taste went for a burton. The Last Detail, Taxi Driver, The Godfather, Pat Garrett And Billy The Kid, Annie Hall, Jaws: the list of grade-A 70s cinema is a long one. Besides this opposition Shampoo is kind of B+, starring as it does the stunning Julie Christie, an astonishingly youthful Carrie Fisher and the man who was the biggest star in the world at the time of the film's release, Henry Warren Beatty.

Despite his touching conviction that if he searches for a word for long enough it will amount to acting, Beatty is a pretty average performer. However, his limits, together with his reliance upon his looks make him perfect for the vapid role of hairdresser to the stars George Roundy. Credit should also go to screenwriter Robert Towne (who described Beatty's contribution to the screenwriting process as "crossing stuff out") who makes some pretty unlikeable people just about bearable.

Verdict

Kitsch, stylish and a little on the empty side, Shampoo is mirror image of the decade that spawned it.

The Landlord

112 minutes

United States (1970)

X

starring Lee Grant , Beau Bridges , Louis Gossett Jr , Pearl Bailey , Diana Sands , Douglas Grant

written by Bill Gunn

directed by Hal Ashby

The directorial debut of Oscar-winning editor Ashby. When Enders (Bridges), the wealthy son of a New York tycoon, buys a run down tenement block in Brooklyn's black ghetto, he plans to turf out the inhabitants and develop the property into a luxury home. To the horror of his mother (Grant), he soon grows fond of the characters living there, finds love (with Sands and Bey) and grows to understand the plight of those less fortunate than he.