

Eric Till's

Wild Horse Hank

Every so often, usually when censorship controversies arise, there are complaints that few of the films in release are suitable for children. *Wild Horse Hank*, one would think, would find a ready audience if these complaints were accurate, since the film contains no sex and little violence. But, aside from one rather dismal week in Calgary last summer, this 1979 production has not seen the light of day. Bill Marshall's hopes to follow up the success of *Outrageous* with another sleeper were dashed, and it had little to do with either Eric Till's direction (competent), Richard Leiterman's photography (very good), Paul Hoffer's music (hummable), or the acting of the cast (workman-like).

The story is based on Mel Ellis' children's novel *The Wild Horse Killers*, and centres on a Montana rancher's daughter, who has returned home after her first semester at University. Her name is Henrietta Bradford (Linda Blair), but she is known by all and sundry as Hank. One day, while searching for a runaway horse, she discovers a herd of wild horses, who have been captured and are about to be sent off to be slaughtered for pet food. After a violent confrontation with Jay Connors (Al Waxman), the leader of the hunters, Hank determines to save the horses by driving them overland to a federal reservation. Despite her father's objections, and harassment from Connors and his men, that is just what she does.

It is quite evident, very early on, what is wrong with the film. Ellis told a simple, conservationist story, basically the type of quasi-mystical communion between teenage girls and horses that is an old reliable staple of juvenile fiction. Scriptwriter James Lee Barrett has tried to pad this out into a marketable action film. Barrett's two-fisted style - his output includes *The Green Berets* and *Smokey and the Bandit* - is hardly the best choice for this tale. His attempts to provide some comic relief to Hank's journey breaks the mood of the picture more than once. For Ellis, the wild horse killers were shadowy, undefined, malevolent characters, unseen figures in planes and jeeps. Barrett makes Jay Connors a beer-drinking slug, with a nagging wife and a pewling two-year-old son. Making a break from the amiable *King of Kensington*, Al Waxman cuts into the role with relish and tries to give Jay a bit of depth, but he can't hide the fact that what has been written is a superfluous nothing. As Jay's younger brother who takes Hank's side, Michael Wintonick is even more lost. And the CB radio angle at the film's climax is merely an example of a fad which has passed its time.

The key to whatever hopes *Wild Horse Hank* has rests on Linda Blair's performance in the title role. She has the advantage of being a capable rider, and she was interested in the project from the beginning, since she had read Ellis' book while making *The Heretic*. After the disaster of that film (though contrary to general belief, John Boorman's mystical apocalypse did make money), Blair at eighteen needed a role like this to break out of the victim image she had been saddled with since *The*

Exorcist and *Born Innocent*. But her luck still seems to be running low. Except for the riding, the role of Hank gives her very little to do. Though she has won a certain notoriety by her drug busts, Blair lacks the connections of Tatum O'Neal, or the air of intelligence of Kristy McNichol and Jodie Foster. Given her curls, chipmunk cheeks and buxom body, she is pretty enough, but in an opposite way to the lean and hungry look popularized by Brooke Shields.

Worse films than *Wild Horse Hank* have been sold, both here and abroad. What finally hamstrung Bill Marshall in his attempts to sell it was a combination of factors. He should have realized that padding the script was a mistake; it would have made a better sixty-minute television production. But it was not the producer's fault that, after the failure of *International Velvet*, stories about teenage girls and horses were an anathema in Hollywood. That, of course, is a commentary on Marshall, but needs no more belaboring. Mordecai Richler has done it well enough.

In the end, *Wild Horse Hank* fails because, like *Kelly*, and any number of other supposed family films, it ignores the necessity of having a good script. *The Black Stallion* has proven that with good writing a film can work without sex and violence. But the absence of sex and violence by itself is no recommendation.

Paul Costabile •

WILD HORSE HANK. d. Eric Till p. Henk Van der Kolk, William Marshall exec. p. Gerald Leider, Daniel Wilson assoc. p/p. man. Les Kimber a.d. Bob Malenfant, Paul Tucker, Rick Drew d. (2nd unit) Max Kleven sc. James Lee Barrett, from the novel "The Wild Horse Killers," by Mel Ellis d.o.p. Richard Leiterman, C.S.C., Keith Woods (2nd unit) cam. op. Cam MacDonald, Don Burgess cont. Diane Parsons, Cathy Brock ed. George Appleby, C.F.E. asst. ed. John Schofield sd. Christopher Large boom Andrew Wilson sd. ed. Brian French, Michael Clark p. design. Trevor Williams art d. Gerry Holmes, Karen Bromley mus. Paul Hoffer make-up Jamie Brown ward. Ilse Richter sp. efx Mel Merrells props Barry Merrells, Bruce Hosick elec. Brian Hawkes, Dale Larson gaf. Malcolm Kendall grip Frank Merrells key wrangler/horse trainer John Scott stunts Wendy Allen, Cathy Brock, Twylla McLean re-rec. Terry Cooke casting Canadian Casting Associates Lp. Linda Blair, Richard Crenna, Albert Waxman, Michael Wincott, Helen Hughes, Stephen E. Miller, Richard Fitzpatrick, Michael J. Reynolds, James D. Morris, Barbara Gordon, Vaughn Webb, Les Carlson, Gary Reineke, Dale Wilson, Kay Grieve, William Ormond Mitchell p.c. Film Consortium of Canada Inc. (1979) col. 35mm dist. Roke Distributors of Calgary running time 90 min.

Tibor Takacs' *The Tomorrow Man*

"We've been trying to get this series into production for years. One of the stumbling blocks we've had to overcome has been people's perception of science fiction itself. A lot of them expect laser beams and naked girls, and that, to me, is not science fiction but sheer nonsense." (Stephen Zoller, *Starburst* magazine)

"Someone must have traduced Joseph K., for without having done anything wrong, he was arrested one fine morning." (The *Trial*, by Franz Kafka)

In 1915, Franz Kafka composed the first draft of his literary masterpiece, *The Trial*, a tale of young Joseph K. and his

inability to fight the ever-tightening grip of a society gone mad. K. awakens one morning to find himself arrested on an unknown charge and for a crime he is certain he did not commit. His subsequent battle against the authorities to gain his freedom is futile. Sixty-six years later, this theme of the loss of personal power to an omnipotent system intent on total control is still frequently imitated, to great success, with the most recent example being *The Tomorrow Man*, a new Canadian science fiction thriller.

Borrowing its themes from both Kafka's *The Trial* and the British TV series *The Prisoner*, *The Tomorrow Man* is a first-rate vision of a world on the brink of madness, and the pilot film for a proposed science fiction series from Norfolk Communications and Mega-Media Productions. Called *Through the Eyes of Tomorrow*, this series is the brainchild of talented writing-directing team Stephen Zoller and Tibor Takacs, creators of the controversial feature, *Metal Messiah*.

Written by Stephen Zoller and Peter Chapman, from a story by Zoller, the film focuses on Tom Weston (Stephen Markle), a typical suburbanite with a beautiful wife (Michelle Chicoine), a secure career as a statistical analyst with General Research, and two cars in the garage. He's happy until the day he's singled out by the New Regime, a governmental cult organization devoted to world domination, for re-organizing. Weston is arrested and taken for interrogation to the Regime's hellish prison complex.

The prison is presided over by the warden (Don Francks), a sadistic manipulator of fear and torture, who demands information the man doesn't have. When his questioning proves a failure, the warden resorts to punishments, both physical and mental. Weston is assigned a cell and a number: 9-8-4. The man who had once worked so happily with numbers has become one himself.

As the years pass and the sadistic cat-and-mouse game between the warden and his captive continues, Weston begins to question his own innocence, and at the end of ten years of imprisonment, he decides he's tired of the game and attempts an escape from the heavily fortified complex...

Much of this film's strength can be attributed to the fine work of its actors, most notably Steven Markle (*Side Streets*) as the tormented Weston, and Don Francks (*Drying Up the Streets*, *My Bloody Valentine* and CBC's *The Phoenix Team*) as the sadistic warden. Both men bring a great deal of depth and power to their roles. Director Takacs and writer Zoller have used the two major characters to great advantage in their attempt at chronicling their future history of a dying planet. The superb

acting, combined with an intelligent script and some fine direction on the part of Takacs, have created a top-notch production. It's no small wonder this film was voted Best Drama Of The Year at the 1980 Canadian Film and Television Association Awards.

As well, *The Tomorrow Man* is full of nightmarish sequences and startling imagery, including one remarkable scene in which Weston, after escaping from his cell and running blindly down a dark maze of endless tunnels and passageways, comes to a stairway he thinks is the way to freedom, only to find the skeletal remains of a fellow escapee lying there, the leering face of the dead man mocking his own attempt at escape. Dream-like images abound here, and much of this is accomplished through the constant use of flashbacks, both to Weston's previous happy life and to the events leading up to his arrest and imprisonment. It is similar in atmosphere to Kafka's *The Trial*, and contains that same dream-like quality inherent in the classic work. It isn't long before both Weston and the viewer are easily caught up in the bizarre game of human chess the warden has created.

The visuals in this picture are also first-rate, with a predominance of bright colours filling the screen. Takacs has used his sets and his visuals to great advantage, even going so far as to converting the Toronto Water Works tunnel system into his prison maze in the final section of the picture.

Kafka would have been proud of *The Tomorrow Man*, for it deals with social and philosophical issues that may face society in the future on an intellectual level, rather than as action-adventure fare for budding Luke Skywalker. As Zoller has stated, there are no laser beams or naked women in this picture. Instead, we're offered a first-rate script, some fine acting and truly superlative visual effects that are a nice change from the gun battles and exploding planetoids of such recent epics as *The Empire Strikes Back* and *The Black Hole*. And all on a budget of only \$150,000. That's quite an achievement. But then again, *The Tomorrow Man* is quite a film.

Lloyd Wasser •

THE TOMORROW MAN. d. Tibor Takacs p. William Macadam exec. p. Don Jean-Louis sc. Stephen Zoller, Peter Chapman d.o.p. Alar Kivilo assoc. p. John Gundy a.d. Mark Krawczynski asst. to p. Walter Woloszczuk ed. Tibor Takacs boom Barry Gilmore make-up Nikko p. asst. Deborah Meldazy (1st), Mike Krawczynski (2nd), Billy Heintz (3rd) hair Rick Christian Zelwacz cost. Helen Dagworthy sp. efx Peter St. Amour, Jeff Bertram, Phil Stevens grips Anna Bourque, Doug Earl, Mike Rea gaffers Dave Simon, Warren Fisher wardrobe Jane Reynolds stills Pattie Meade Lp. Stephen Markle, Don Francks, David Clement, Stan Wilson, Gail Dahms, Michelle Chicoine p.c. Mega-Media Communications Corp. (1979) col. 16mm dist. (Cda) Norfolk Communications running time (2 versions) 56 min., 76 min.

It's man versus machine as a robot keeper's shadow falls over a terrified Tom Weston (Stephen Markle)

