

FILM REVIEWS

Death Of A Lumberjack, The Pyx, The Newcomers and The Little Girl Who Lives Down The Lane, deserves the credit for this achievement.

Verzier's contribution to *Search and Destroy* is all that more important when one considers how routine the rest of the film is. Don Enright's script is thoroughly unoriginal, relying on Hawkesian truisms to explain the conflict. The Vietnamese officer was abandoned by Kip and his men because he had left one of the team to die, and, as Kip explains to his girlfriend, in the jungle "you had to look out for your buddies. There was no one else." At least the filmmakers have the honesty to explicitly acknowledge the racism inherent in that attitude. Unfortunately they undercut it by making the killer a typical fanatic, who carries around a plethora of Catholic holy cards which he lights candles to.

Likewise, the acting never rises above the journeyman level. Perry King, an unspectacular actor, and Don Stroud, a heavy in the Bruce Dern tradition (he was the principal villain in *Death Weekend*) who is trying to change his image, are only adequate. As a weary police officer, horrified that a war is about to erupt in his own town at the height of the tourist season, that old bull, George Kennedy, has another of those roles that he can, and does, perform in his sleep. Mia Farrow's sister Tisa (last seen in that bizarre James Torback vehicle for Harvey Keitel called *Fingers*) might as well not be present as Kip's girlfriend, for all she is required to do. One wonders why these American actors — who, except for Kennedy, have no viewer profile — are in this Canadian film. At least Toronto karate teacher Park Jong Soo, who plays the killer, has a reason to be there, and performs what is essentially a stunt role with reasonable dispatch.

A film like *Search And Destroy* raises, in the final analysis, some important questions. Is there not something rather patronizing and smug about Canadian filmmakers, however much they may hide their nationality, doing a picture about the consequences of the American war in Vietnam on its people — especially considering our own country's rather ambiguous role in that conflict? And why is it that the author of such a landmark script as *Goin' Down The Road*, in order to keep employed, must do a picture like this? Though it is made with craft and some style, it says nothing that has not been said before.

Paul Costabile

Alvin Rakoff's Death Ship

p.c. Bloodstar Productions (ABP) Ltd./Bloodstar (UK) (1979) exec.p. Sandy Howard p. Derek Gibson, Harold Greenberg assoc.p. Adrian Hughes d. Alvin Rakoff a.d. Charles Braive (1st), Pedro Gandol (2nd) sc. John Robins d.o.p. René Verzier p.man. Roger Héroux 2nd cam. Frank Lenk cont. June Randall art.d. Chris Burke, Michel Proulx ed. Mike Campbell sp.effects Mike Albrechtsen props Normand Simpson, David Phillips sd.rec. Henri Blondeau boom Normand Mercier unit man. Jacques Pinard p.account. Shirley Gill ward. Gaudeline Sauriol make-up Joan Isaacson hair Pierre David stills Frank Connor p.sec. Monique Brasseur l.p. George Kennedy, Richard Crenna, Nick Mancuso, Sally Ann Howes, Kate Reid, Victoria Burgoyne, Jennifer McKinney, Danny Higham, Saul Rubinek col. 35mm running time 91 min. dist. Asral (Canada), AVCO-Embassy (USA)

A terrible script sinks a film, no matter how interesting the concept, no matter how famous or competent the cast. The script of Alvin Rakoff's *Death Ship* offers elements of what could have been a compelling story, but fails to develop them. Instead of information, it supplies enough clichés to virtually paralyze every member of the cast; the story is merely a vehicle for meaningless images of sensational horror, and its impact is strictly monetary.

Death Ship concerns a group of people who survive the sinking of their luxury liner, only to find themselves

"saved" by an old, crewless freighter which is haunted by a malicious force set upon killing them. This group includes the aging Captain Ashland; Marshall, the sensible second-in-command; Marshall's wife and two kids; Nick, a handsome midshipman; Lori, his lover; Sylvia, a quirky widow, and Jackie, the ship's entertainer. George Kennedy is Ashland, the central character, bitter and dissatisfied at the end of a long career at sea. The malicious evil turns out to be nothing less than the spirit of Nazi Germany — the freighter being a derelict torture ship left over from World War II.

A "suspense-thriller," as *Death Ship* has been dubbed, ought to be structured enigmatically, spinning itself out in bits and pieces. In the first five minutes we just barely get the sense that Ashland is mad at the world. . . Then disaster strikes. He is rescued, but he is in a coma, and stays that way more than halfway through the film. When he finally begins to participate in the action again, he has been completely possessed by the haunted ship, although we don't know why or how.

We are, however, given a few clues as to the nature of this mystery ship, and what it represents. Periodically a German voice issues an order over the ship's intercom; the way the ship 'kills' two of its captives is reminiscent of SS torture methods. But there is no indication of any connection between Ashland and Nazism. When they merge it is arbitrary, and the script allows it to remain so.



Fighting the odds to survive the *Death Ship*, are Kate Reid, George Kennedy and Richard Crenna

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Instead of a glimpse into Ashland's personality by way of a few lines of personal philosophy, which might explain the alignment, all we hear from him are insipid exclamations like, "My ship needs blood to survive!"

Lines such as these make it impossible for Kennedy, who is a good actor, to take the character anywhere. But any character who becomes possessed by the spirit of Nazism should be given some depth. Even fascism gone berserk has a purpose and a structure. If it's going to be used as the defining concept of a story or a film, these have to be explored and articulated. Nazism is too complex and horrifying a subject to be presented simply as a metaphor for gross terror.

Or is all of this reading too much into a "suspense-thriller" called *Death Ship*? No; it's just demanding some integrity on the part of the filmmakers.

There is no point in criticizing the talent in such a production. With the exception of Richard Crenna, who manages to hold his own as Trevor Marshall, the hero, they are all very bad. But they never really get a chance to be good. George Kennedy comes across the worst of all.

Behind the camera, Rakoff is hot and cold. He misses in his attempts to create an atmosphere of entrapment on the decks of the old freighter — he is never in tight enough, and he has all that surrounding open air and sea working against him. So, when the lifeboats suddenly free themselves and splash into the ocean, or when Jackie the comedian is grabbed from behind by a sneaky crane, hoisted aloft and then dunked, it is funny rather than frightening.

Below decks, in the more confined settings of engine rooms and cabins, Rakoff does succeed in making us hold our breath. As Trevor Marshall and Nick close in on the source of the mystery, and as they are battered by the ship's most powerful weapon, a screeching Nazi propaganda film, Rakoff combines with special effects man Mike Albrechtsen and D.O.P. René Verzier to create a mesmerizing climax.

Despite this, nothing can save *Death Ship*. The only thing that endures is the question of the script. Did John Roberts write it badly on purpose? Was he coerced and beaten by producers Gibson and Greenberg? And doesn't anybody who participated in the financing of this disaster have any sense of what's good and what's bad?

John Brooke



photo: John Dawson

'Team Spirit' could be the motto for York University's 1980 Film Class — together, they put on a good show

York University Class of '80

On Saturday afternoon, May 3, the Film Department of York University presented five films produced by fourth-year students. The showcase was billed as "The Class of '80." The screening at Toronto's Fine Arts Cinema was attended by a capacity audience.

The five films — *Videoscope*, *Knives and Forks*, *The Silent Laugh*, *Performances* and *The Man From Zodiac* — represented an amazing diversity of young talent in all aspects of film production. Each film was a drama, approximately twenty-five minutes in length. Themes ranged from the sensitive examination of values in *Knives and Forks*, to the demonic send-up of *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* in *Zodiac*. Technically, all the films were as professional as one could want; the most impressive being, *The Silent Laugh*. Written and directed by Richard Zywockiewicz, the mystery story concerns the plight of a group of people

stuck in an isolated house with a dead body. By attempting to delve into the heart of the upper middle class, the script gets carried away with itself toward the end. But this is of little consequence, as the sound and the visuals say it all anyway. In the opening scene, filmed in the Toronto-Dominion Centre, the sound effects provide a wondrous sense of high financial hubbub and personal isolation simultaneously. And the details of the accoutrement in the cottage, where the murder took place, are poetic in their depiction of upper middle class style and sensibility.

The best film, over-all, was *Videoscope*, written and directed by Karen Hall.

The use of television within a film is a metaphor that has obvious relevancy and, therefore, power. It works; witness *Being There* and *The Man Who Fell to Earth*. *Videoscope* concerns a man named Richard who has a video project to do for his boss. He hires a cameraman with a porta-pak and tours around the city picking up bits and pieces of "reality." The team repeats a pattern of shooting, view-