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Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
Club Notice - 01/11/91 -- Vol. 9, No. 28

MEETINGS UPCOMING:

Unless otherwise stated, all meetings are on Wednesdays at noon.
LZ meetings are in LZ 2R-158. MT meetings are in the cafeteria.

 D A T E T O P I C

- 01/30 LZ: RITE OF PASSAGE by Alexei Panshin (Adolescence)
- 02/20 LZ: MARTIANS, GO HOME! by Frederic Brown (Social Satire)
- 03/13 LZ: TOM SWIFT by Victor Appleton II (Juvenile SF)

 D A T E E X T E R N A L M E E T I N G S / C O N V E N T I O N S / E T C

- 01/12 SFABC: Science Fiction Association of Bergen County: Lawrence Schwinger (artist) (phone 201-933-2724 for details) (Saturday)
- 01/19 NJSFS: New Jersey Science Fiction Society: TBA (phone 201-432-5965 for details) (Saturday)

HO Chair: John Jetzt HO 1E-525 834-1563 hocpa!jetzt
LZ Chair: Rob Mitchell LZ 1B-306 576-6106 mtuxo!jrrt
MT Chair: Mark Leeper MT 3D-441 957-5619 mtgzy!leeper
HO Librarian: Tim Schroeder HO 3B-301 949-4488 hotsc!tps
LZ Librarian: Lance Larsen LZ 3L-312 576-3346 mtunq!lfl
MT Librarian: Evelyn Leeper MT 1F-329 957-2070 mtgzy!ecl
Factotum: Evelyn Leeper MT 1F-329 957-2070 mtgzy!ecl
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1. Somehow with war seeming so close and with the alliance against Saddam Hussein being less than totally supportive, it would be easy to see this as a big unfriendly world. A little thought, however, should tell you this is not at all the case. The United States has never been at a loss for friends around the world when the chips are down. And luckily we have always been happy to be nice to good friends. We have been willing to overlook minor imperfections and occasionally even reward the political leaders whom we have been proud to call friends.

During World War II, for example, we had Joseph Stalin. We might not have been really keen on his politics, but that was an internal matter. What counted was that he was anti-Nazi and we showed him how much we appreciate friends in the post-war settlement.

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Later, when Communism became a serious world threat, lots of people too numerous to mention rallied to our aid, good friends one and all. Notable was the government of South Vietnam, perhaps somewhat corrupt but friendly nonetheless. But their corruption was an internal matter. They were against the same people we were, so we could overlook internal matters. The same can be said for the government of El Salvador. In fact, South America has provided a host of friendly governments willing to be anti-Communist to the point of violating the human rights of their own people just to fight Communism. And while we are on the subject of good buddies we had to the south, how can we forget to mention that prince of a guy, Manuel Noriega? Panama is a very sensitive area and look how lucky we were to be able to get a man in who was willing to work closely with the CIA and who is staunchly anti-Communist. Noriega is a true believer in free enterprise.

In the Philippines who can forget our warm relations with Ferdinand Marcos? He fought to keep American bases open so we could continue to fight Communism. The United States may not have always cared for his politics--it would have been nice if he had tied up the Aquino murder more conclusively--but we supported him until shortly before he left office and then we harbored him the rest of his life.

I think history will look favorably on our support of the Shah of Iran. He may have been no prize as a leader, but he was opposed to the right people; he was pro-American and anti-Communist. When the Ayatollah who replaced him proved to be so rabidly against the United States, a new friend popped up to help our interests, Saddam Hussein. Much of what Saddam knows about warfare and particularly chemical warfare he learned from the United States. That's how good a friend we can be if someone opposes our enemies. And if he used mustard and nerve gas against the Iranians, well, we may not have liked his methods but he was, after all, pro-American and the

Iranians certainly were not. If he used poison gas against Iraq's internal population of Kurds, we did not have to like the fact; it was an internal matter, after all. That was in 1988 and in 1989 the State Department was still saying, "We want to deepen and broaden our relationship [with Iraq]." And darned if we didn't do it! That is just the kind of friend the United States can be.

And it is in this spirit of friendship that I want to welcome Syria's Haffaz al-Assad into the fold as one of our good friends in the alliance against Iraq, and I would like to congratulate him on the big bite he recently took out of Lebanon. Hey, we are hardly going to complain if he is stealing part of another country. He is, after all, willing to be counted as an ally in the war against Iraq.

Now Congress has been accused of not doing its job from time to time. Congress does not hold the line on expenses, we are told.

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It has even been accused of "mortgaging our future." At least we can feel that the State Department is watching out for the future. It makes good friends, ignores their faults, and helps them to prosper, and they when they go bad we move on to new friends, ignoring their faults. There are always more friends out there.

Mark Leeper
MT 3D-441 957-5619
...mtgzy!leeper

What is man's chief enemy? Each man is his own.
-- Anacharsis

AWAKENINGS

A film review by Mark R. Leeper
Copyright 1991 Mark R. Leeper

Capsule review: What is it like to wake up after having slept for decades? What is it like to discover the means to wake such people up? Robin Williams and Robert DeNiro star in one of the most intriguing films of the year. Rating: +2 (-4 to +4).

With the possible exception of T_h_e_G_o_d_f_a_t_h_e_r_P_a_r_t_I_I_I, the most avidly awaited film of the winter season is probably Penny Marshall's A_w_a_k_e_n_i_n_g_s. Robin Williams stars in the fictionalized telling of a modern medical miracle performed by neurologist Oliver Sacks. In the role of Dr. Sacks--whose name has been changed to Dr. Malcolm Sayer--is Robin Williams. Whatever Williams is doing to improve his acting, it is working very well; his acting noticeably improves with each succeeding film he makes. His Malcolm Sayer is a real departure. Rather than his usual self-assured characters, Sayer is painfully introverted but caught up in an idea that becomes a dream and then a reality.

The film begins with a prologue in 1932. Young Leonard Lowe is having occasional fits of shaking in his right arm. As time passes, the fits are getting worse and Leonard is becoming seriously frightened by them. Flash forward thirty-seven years to 1969. Malcolm Sayer, a researcher in neurology, has spent the last five years working with earthworms in a project that failed. Now he is looking for work and is hired to care for the incurably ill at a Bronx hospital, a job he finds unnerving until his curiosity is aroused by several patients who appear to be living vegetables but who show odd signs of consciousness. The common belief is that there cannot be any mental activity but only because the alternative is too agonizing to contemplate. Sayer thinks that the symptoms he is seeing may be an extreme form of the same symptoms caused by an unrelated disease, Parkinson's disease. The drug L-DOPA alleviates Parkinson's symptoms and Sayer thinks it may work on these patients. The guess turns out to be correct and people who have been mental vegetables for three decades or more begin to wake up. The film then becomes the dual story of Dr. Sayer and the awakening patients, particularly Leonard Lowe (now played by Robert DeNiro).

Rarely does a film really bring home the value of being free to do what most of the world takes for granted. In Y_e_n_t_l it was the right to learn. C_h_a_r_l_y was a paean to the ability to think. A_w_a_k_e_n_i_n_g_s is about the ability to experience life at all, to see the world around us. DeNiro does a fine job playing the afflicted Lowe grasping for life when he can. Julie Kavner is also notable as a nurse with faith in Sayer. She is a fine character actress. Disappointingly, however, the film never explores the question it raised so fervently. How conscious are Sayer's patients? What was their consciousness like in their vegetable state? These questions are never satisfactorily answered.

A_w_a_k_e_n_i_n_g_s is not a great film. At times it is too pat. At 121 minutes it is too short to do justice to the story of both the doctor and the patients. My rating then is +2 on the -4 to +4 scale.

THE BONFIRE OF THE VANITIES
A film review by Mark R. Leeper
Copyright 1991 Mark R. Leeper

Capsule review: DePalma echoes some things worth saying, amplifies some things that are not, twists the tone of the Wolfe book, and makes the audience seasick in the process. With over-rated boxoffice stars such as Hanks, Griffith, and Willis, he stacked the deck against himself. Rating: low 0 (-4 to +4).

T_h_e_B_o_n_f_i_r_e_o_f_t_h_e_V_a_n_i_t_i_e_s is an occasionally audacious comedy with a large number of grievous faults. Many of those faults would either disappear or would be outweighed by the film's virtues if this had been an original screenplay and there had not already been a novel with a similar plot and identical title written by Tom Wolfe. As an adaptation of a novel, Brian DePalma's film and Michael Cristofer's screenplay are a total botch. As a film that stands by itself, it has some very nice touches and is only a partial botch. Any film that sets out to point out social ills and has something to offend nearly everybody cannot be all bad, but a comedy that ends with some dignified character summing up the film and making a sermon for more "decency" at the end has a hard time being all good either. In the 1950s and 1960s a Spencer Tracy or perhaps a Henry Fonda could sermonize and it would work. Here it is like getting to the bottom of an ice cream sundae and finding a chunk of prime rib.

The story of T_h_e_B_o_n_f_i_r_e_o_f_t_h_e_V_a_n_i_t_i_e_s has much the same world-view as Billy Wilder's excellent A_c_c_e_i_n_t_h_e_H_o_l_e (known on television as T_h_e_B_i_g_C_a_r_n_i_v_a_l). Each is a story of a human mishap and a large number of people professing only the best of intent swarming to it like sharks to serve their own self-seeking ends. In this case, the mishap occurs when Wall Street wizard Sherman McCoy (played by Tom Hanks) is driving his mistress home from the airport, misses an exit, and must drive through an unfriendly part of the Bronx. They are trapped in a probable mugging attempt. They try to escape with mistress Maria Ruskin unknowingly backing McCoy's car into one of the muggers. An alcoholic reporter, Peter Fallow (played by Bruce Willis), desperately needing a big story blows this one into big headlines. Also, a black minister, the Reverend Bacon (played by John Hancock), whose resemblance to the Reverend Al Sharpton is "purely coincidental," decides to use the incident for political grist. Soon a whole circus of vultures is preying on the incident from all angles, blowing it into a major racial incident.

And from all angles is exactly how DePalma chose to film B_o_n_f_i_r_e. DePalma has often used interesting camera angles to add atmosphere to a scene. Here he does it by far too often and for often inexplicable reasons. The audience watches a phone conference from the ceiling of a

room looking straight down. There is no explanation to the viewer of what he or she is doing on the ceiling.

The film actually has a cast which includes some very fine actors such as Morgan Freeman, F. Murray Abraham, Donald Moffat, Robert Stephens, and Andre Gregory. Medium-weight notables include Saul Rubinek, a clever comic actor misused here. Then there are some dead-weight actors apparently on hand for boxoffice value. These include Tom Hanks, Bruce Willis, and Melanie Griffith. Perhaps a good director could squeeze a good performance if they were perfectly cast. Here they are not, and DePalma is not that good a director. Hanks is wooden and evokes little emotion from the role. Griffith is once again quite good at taking off her clothes, but her ability to do a Southern sexpot named Maria is beyond her ability. She does not look like a Maria and her Southern accent is forced. The accent also probably changed in the course of filming and in her first scene in the film her voice sounded crudely overdubbed. Then there is Bruce Willis. His flat acting did not get in the way of the "Die Hard" films. About the only film he would be well-cast in would be T_h_e_B_r_u_c_e_W_i_l_l_i_s_S_t_o_r_y, and even there it is questionable if he could really get into the character.

With more smoke than fire, T_h_e_B_o_n_f_i_r_e_o_f_t_h_e_V_a_n_i_t_i_e_s never ignites. I give it a low 0 on the -4 to +4 scale.

