



2009 PARAMOUNT SUMMER FILM SERIES

M*A*S*H

(1970) COLOR 116 MINUTES

Director: Robert Altman. **Screenplay:** Ring Lardner Jr., from the novel by Richard Hooker. **Cinematography:** Harold E. Stine. **Editor:** Danford B. Greene. **Music:** Johnny Mandel. **Art Direction:** Jack Martin Smith, Arthur Lonergan. **Cast:** Donald Sutherland, Elliott Gould, Tom Skerritt, Sally Kellerman, Robert Duvall, Jo An Pflug, Rene Auberjonois, Roger Bowen, Gary Burghoff, Fred Williamson, John Shuck, Bud Cort, G. Wood.

CATCH-22

(1970) COLOR 121 MINUTES

Director: Mike Nichols. **Screenplay:** Buck Henry from the novel by Joseph Heller. **Cinematography:** David Watkin. **Editor:** Sam O'Steen. **Production Design:** Richard Sylbert. **Cast:** Alan Arkin, Martin Balsam, Richard Benjamin, Art Garfunkel, Jack Gilford, Buck Henry, Bob Newhart, Anthony Perkins, Paula Prentiss, Martin Sheen, Jon Voight, Orson Welles, Bob Balaban, Marcel Dalio, Norman Fell, Charles Grodin, Austin Pendleton, Peter Bonerz, Elizabeth Wilson.

Human history is full of warfare. Some of these wars were internalized, as in civil wars. Some involved neighboring countries and two involved the entire world on a global scale. Wars have been fought for a variety of reasons including: the acquisition of territory; the assertion of power, freedom and independence; religious and moral causes; and many more. Regardless of the cause or which side is "right," wars are bloody, deadly affairs that demand the ultimate price: the loss of human lives. At the heart of every conflict, no matter what the scale, are people—men and women engaged in a life and death struggle. Because of this, wars are the stuff of great drama and, thus, the stuff of great films.

There's probably been at least one movie made about every major war (and some of the minor ones) ever fought from ancient times to today. In American history alone, there have been countless films made about the Revolutionary War, the Texas Revolution, the Civil War, World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the current involvement in both Iraq and Afghanistan. And it's a sure bet that films about these conflicts and others will continue to be made.

But war is also one hell of a crazy business. It takes its toll both physically and mentally and veterans who come back from the battlefields in one piece may be damaged in ways we cannot see. In order to deal with the day-to-day insanity of killing and being killed, men and women in combat situations often adopt a grim sense of humor as a means of coping with the madness that rages around them. The two films on display here are perfect examples of the graveyard humor of war.

In Robert Altman's *M*A*S*H*, the action takes place during the Korean War at a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital near the front lines that is populated by a variety of zany characters. Altman's black comedy, his first big commercially-successful film, was one of the rare anti-war films that actually made money at a time when the United States military was actually involved in a foreign conflict.

*M*A*S*H* was a radically different type of film, one that abandoned the traditional narrative constructs of more mainstream Hollywood films. That is,

it has no real plot. Instead, a series of comic vignettes are interlaced with grim scenes in the operating room and the whole affair is climaxed by a loony football game. It's an episodic look at the lives of men and women thrown together under the most stressful of circumstances and how they cope with the ordeal.

They cope with humor and tons of booze. Hawkeye (Sutherland) and Trapper John (Gould) are the main characters, two surgeons drafted to serve who would just as soon be imbibing martinis and playing golf (which they manage to do) than be in Korea. All of the characters we came to know in the subsequent, immensely popular television series are here: Frank Burns (Duvall), Hot Lips (Kellerman), Colonel Blake (Bowen), Father Mulcahy (Auberjonois) and Radar O'Reilly (Burghoff, who was the only member of the film cast to make the transition to the television series.)

If you've never seen the original *M*A*S*H* and only know the television series, you may wonder what all of the fuss was about with the film. But in 1970, this was bold, daring, cutting edge material. *M*A*S*H* received five Academy Award nominations including: Best Picture, Best Director, Best Supporting Actress (Kellerman), and Best Adapted Screenplay (winner). It ranks number fifty-six on the American Film Institute's list of the top one hundred films of the twentieth century and number seven on the AFI list of the one hundred funniest American movies of all time.

Released the same year but meeting with far less success, both commercially and critically, was *Catch-22*. Adapted from Joseph Heller's satirical novel, it's another war time film full of lunatic characters. But the film was mired in both production problems and artistic issues that led to its ultimate failure.

The talented production team of director Mike Nichols and screenwriter Buck Henry worked on the film for two years to tackle the complex task of recreating a World War II bomber base and the even more daunting challenge of adapting Heller's non-linear, multiple points-of-view novel.

The story follows the adventures and misadventures of Captain Yossarian (Arkin), a U.S. Army Air Force B-25 bombardier, and the other members of his squadron stationed on the Mediterranean island of Pianosa during World War II. The pacing of the film is frenetic, its tenor intellectual, and its tone largely absurdist, interspersed with brief moments of gritty, almost horrific, realism. The film, like the novel, does not follow a normal chronological progression. Instead, it is told as a series of flashbacks and dream sequences from the point of view of Yossarian.

The adaptation inevitably changed the novel's plot. Several story arcs are left out and many characters in the film speak the dialogue and experience the events of other characters in the book. Despite the changes, Joseph Heller approved of the film and was particularly impressed with a few scenes and bits of dialogue that Henry crafted for the film.

The film was budgeted at \$17 million and the flying scenes, scheduled for six weeks of shooting, required six months of filming and 1,500 hours in the air for the bombers. The scenes appear on screen for approximately ten minutes. But *Catch-22* did save several B-25 Mitchell bombers from the junk heap. Fifteen of the eighteen bombers used in the film remain intact, with one on display at the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum.

Catch-22, despite its pedigree cast and crew, is nevertheless regarded as the lesser of the two big anti-war films released in 1970. It suffered in comparison to *M*A*S*H* but it does have its moments and is definitely worth seeing.

— Frank Campbell

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