

The Swimmer

Film review

Thomas Haroldson

1968

Eleanor and Frank Perry, who made “David and Lisa,” have come out with a new film called “The Swimmer.” Although it does not resemble, or live up to, their previous effort, it’s a better movie than most critics would have you believe.

I feel, despite what you might have heard to the contrary, that “The Swimmer” is a motion picture worth seeing. I should point out, however, that I’m probably the only reviewer in the country who feels this way.

Since my opinion may form a minority of one, it’s only fair that I offer some explanation of what brought it about.

For one thing, I was pleased, rather than appalled by the film’s allegorical content. It was vaguely refreshing to see a Hollywood production that had the nerve to explore a social theme in strictly symbolic terms.

The stylized acting (which most people feel is atrocious) is in keeping with the unrealistic nature of the picture. Since “The Swimmer” is a modern morality play, there is nothing wrong with the characters being presented as types, rather than as individuals. It may be “bad acting”, but it’s wholly appropriate.

And, of course, the plot almost demands that the characters act strained and unnatural. After all, how would you behave if an old friend (who probably escaped from a mental institution) suddenly appeared in your back yard wearing only a bathing suit?

However, even if the acting cannot be justified, the intriguing, fairly suspenseful story, makes the picture worth seeing.

In a sense, the movie might well be entitled “The Graduate Revisited”. It returns to the middle-aged pool crowd in “The Graduate” who bragged about their affluence, drank too much, and advised Ben to go into plastics.

Ned Merrill, played by Burt Lancaster, is a typical member of this group—or at least he was before “something happened”.

It is not clear at first what this something is, but it is obvious that Merrill is a sick man, or perhaps a man who has been sick and is desperately attempting to get well.

After appearing out of nowhere at a friend’s pool, Merrill decides that he will (or can) return home by swimming, pool by pool, across the country.

From this point on, each pool becomes, in effect, an unholy Station of the Cross at which he meets someone from his past life. As the picture progresses the nature of Merrill’s “sickness” becomes clearer. As he follows what he calls the Lucinda River (named for his wife) one sees what kind of life he once led and what kind of person he once was.

Since Merrill appears to be a pretty nice guy, it comes as somewhat of a surprise to discover that he used to be the biggest bastard in town. In fact, he hurt so many people that his present torment seems to be nothing less than an appropriate form of damnation. (At least one writer has suggested that Merrill is dead and has been condemned to a living Hell).

But if the swimmer is damned, so are his former nouveau riche friends. They have the same sickness that he has. All of them have sold their souls for a chunk of plastic, and it's only a matter of time before they too will be destroyed by the "good life" that they lust after.

Like any morality play, "The Swimmer" is simon-simple. In fact, its message, or messages, can be summed up in a series of platitudes: "As you sow, so shall you reap;" "All that glitters is not gold;" "The best things in life are free;" "You can't go home again;" etc.

However, despite the fact that the picture is overly simplistic and riddled with numerous artistic and thematic faults, it remains (at least for me) strangely appealing. I don't think I'll ever again be able to look at a swimming pool without remembering the Lucinda River. Perhaps it is because I have an urge to swim down it myself.

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