

Petulia at the Studio

Thomas Haroldson

1968

Richard Lester's new film, "Petulia," is a contradiction in terms—it is at one and the same time old-fashioned, avant-garde, sophisticated, heavy-handed, and pointless.

Lester, who directed the Beatles films and "How I Won the War," is no stranger to cinematic mixed bags, but this time something went wrong.

For one reason or another the entire picture has a certain déjà-vu quality about it. In fact, one gets the feeling that "Petulia" is really nothing more than a composite remake of several old flicks. It also has the added problem of being a film made principally for an older audience. I suspect that only people over forty will fully appreciate what it is about.

Of course, there is always the possibility that the picture is in reality a colossal put-on that attempts to parody modern film makers in general, and Resnais in particular. (It's exactly the kind of love story that Resnais would turn out, if he were about 99 percent stoned).

But if "Petulia" is intended to be a cinematic joke the humor doesn't always come through. And I'm afraid that some of the funniest scenes are not supposed to be funny—but then it's often hard to tell.

For example, as Julie Christie goes into the first stages of childbirth, her doctor, George Scott, asks her to run off with him. As the labor pains increase, George becomes downright insistent:

"Look," he says, "I'll get you into a private clinic, and if the baby comes before we get there, I can handle it. I've delivered hundreds of kids—in meat wagons."

Admittedly; this sounds more like a sick joke than a love scene; but then one can't be sure. It's too serious to be really funny, yet too absurd to be taken seriously.

The entire picture is like this. A farcical potential lurks beneath every tragic scene, and the farcical episodes are in turn quite tragic.

It's the sort of film that reviewers used to call a "bittersweet" comedy. Only in this case the bitter and the sweet are blended together in such a way that it is almost impossible to tell one from the other.

However, I don't mean to make "Petulia" sound more sophisticated than it is. Despite its occasional cleverness, it remains on the whole a fairly unimpressive picture.

Bits and pieces of the film are pretty good, but the total package adds up to—little more than a routine exercise in Modern film-making.

The Resnais flash-back technique seems rather dated (especially for Lester), and is not handled with any particular skill. Even the fine performances of Julie Christie and George C. Scott are not enough to give the picture a truly interesting focal point.

"Petulia" is the kind of movie that some people might want to see once, but I doubt that anyone will want to see it a second time.

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