

Joanna

The Late Late Show dolled up for the Swinging Sixties (film review)

Dennis Raymond

1969

In an issue of *Esquire* magazine of a year or so ago, a brace of famous writers suggested that the '60s have been too long with us, and that we hereby declare them at an end and devote the next few years to resting up.

In the course of that event, an occasional look at "Joanna" and "The Chelsea Girls" will tell us much of what we were.

"Joanna" comes to us as an ode to youthful angst, and about as dated as last week's color supplement. The protagonist of the title is a dizzy little bird, who is attributed with the uncommon habit of "sleeping around."

Apparently writer-director Michael Sarne sees this as some sort of perversion because everyone keeps telling Joanna "...you've got to be committed to something." And sure enough, by the end of the sixth reel, Joanna has found that "something" in her unborn child.

I suspect that the reason so many fine professional film critics turn sour (Pauline Kael is a prime example) or simply quit the profession (like Ranata Adler) is because they have to sit through so much that is old hat for those few original moments or the tiny shocks of recognition.

They're wrong when they blame it on the movies going bad. The recurrence of certain themes in movies suggests that each generation wants romance restated in new, modern terms. The problem with a popular art form is that those who want something more are in hopeless minority - compared with the millions who are always seeing it for the first time.

We've all seen "Joanna" before. It goes all the way back to the best of Joan Crawford or the worst of Carole Lombard. Sarne's basic premise is so corny it's become a kind of American staple: the cute little country bumpkin comes to the Big City and plays her life away, only to discover the meaning of Responsibility and other Realities in time for the final credits. "Joanna" is the late, late show all dolled up for the Swinging Sixties.

The best thing Sarne could possibly have done with formula material like "Joanna" is to make fun of it, which he does do in a rather careless way. Why, then, do so many people take it seriously, eager to gobble it up as art?

A few weeks back I regretfully ran into a local radio celebrity, a member of the dying breed that still exchanges trivial Hollywood gossip over the airwaves.

When the subject of "Joanna" arose, I mentioned that I didn't particularly like it, whereupon he stared at me in wide-eyed astonishment, shaking his head at my youthful callowness.

"It says so much that's true about commitment and responsibility," he stated with pride, and I averted my eyes in embarrassment, hoping he wouldn't see the smile breaking across my face. Just how could I go about explaining to that funny little old man that this was exactly the kind of mentality and romanticism that the movie lampoons to the extreme.

It was almost too painful. And yet he isn't alone in his adverse insights. Several fine critics have lauded "Joanna" as being beautiful or artistic. It's artistic alright; in the same way that *Vogue* magazine is "artistic."

I haven't bothered to say that "Joanna" is a terrible movie because although that's implicit in what I'm saying, it's a minor matter. The point is that it's not an ordinary movie and whether it's good or bad is of less interest than

why so many people respond to it the way they do. Especially as, in this case, they are probably responding to exactly what makes it terrible.

Is “Joanna” a put-on? Most of it would indicate yes. Yet there are elements that clearly say no.

There is an unsteady vision here, an inconsistency of style, and that, in my opinion is the reason for the film’s failure. Only a mature, sophisticated movie-maker, a Truffaut or an Arthur Penn, could have brought it off.

Sarne lacks that lightness, charm and wit required to strike a satisfactory balance between the serious and the satiric. It just doesn’t jell, and we are left with a series of brilliant fragments that bear no relation to one another.

Those who made “Joanna” (the 20th Century Fox study guide is careful to point out that all concerned were “under 30”) probably not only share in the confusion of the material but, like that radio celebrity, accept the confusion as expressive of youth today when all it does is alienate us.

This indifference to artistic control is something new that has given birth to a whole chain of vulgar “youth cult” movies like “Candy” and “Duffy.” At best, we may get something that makes a new kind of art out of embarrassment; at worst, lack of control may become what art is taken to mean.

“Joanna” is so glib, so clever, so determinedly “hip” that it leaves you way behind. It’s like the worst of Godard, Fellini, and Resnais on one appalling triple bill. It’s “touching” one moment and weird the next, and like “Candy,” it has evaporated before you’re outside the theatre.

Even that sense of discomfort, of puzzlement, evaporates, because it is all made trivial—Joanna’s pain as well as her bright moments.

For example, without any preparation or explanation there is a horrifying dream sequence in which she discovers her father lying dead on a beach with his throat slit. She drags him off to her car, where he awakens as if from a sleep and begins to beat her. And twice more throughout the film, Joanna’s boyfriends take their turns at slugging her.

Is all this supposed to provide some deep psychological reason for Joanna’s promiscuity? Will these episodes or the lack of reaction to them in the movie itself prove upsetting to the audience? I doubt it.

It’s all the cleverness of TV commercials and advertising art. And clever Michael Sarne; this 28-year-old pop singer, actor, composer, photographer, journalist, book and film critic not only wrote and directed the movie, he also supervised the advertising campaign.

He’s what you might call an auteur’s auteur. If nothing else, “Joanna” stands as a triumph of advertising genius. The ads show a full frontal view of Joanna herself (Genieve Waite) in the buff.

But there’s something missing; 20th Century Fox has erased her nipples. Like the movie itself, the ads are all teasers, all promises.

While a movie like “Joanna” makes you want to throw up, “The Chelsea Girls” just makes you want to take a nap. Andy Warhol’s 3-1/2 hour epic of the Underground has reached Detroit two years since it’s initial New York release, and already it’s lost any of the shock value it once boasted. We’ve all become too jaded for that sort of thing; at least, that’s what I thought till I read the local press reaction to “Chelsea Girls,” defining it as “educational,” “an apocalyptic vision of a civilization in collapse,” etc.

Awww, come on fellows. Are we really supposed to believe that Warhol is so appalled by promiscuity, drugs, and homosexuality?

I don’t think it makes much difference in the world if people are bored or drunk or queer or autoerotic. They may be disgusting (and they may be highly entertaining) but they don’t do much harm. Warhol had simply decided to get together with some pals to make a movie of their party, not that “apocalyptic expose.”

“The Chelsea Girls” is sporadically amusing, but in the end, it seems that the people on the screen are having more fun than the people in the audience.

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