Films

Alice's Restaurant

J. Kerry Kammer

1969

"Alice's Restaurant" is a good film and makes for a reasonably enjoyable evening's entertainment. Several passages are even outstanding. But a revolutionary anthem it ain't. Which, granted it never promised to be, but Arlo Guthrie's laughing, sardonic musical manslaughter could have been turned into a fantastic, frantically fruitful film, not just a good one. And it's too bad.

Director Arthur Penn's ("Bonnie and Clyde," and "The Miracle Worker") obsessive accuracy to the original source may be admirable, but it's not very right or real in cinematic terms.

Arlo's vocal rendition of the Thanksgiving Day Massacre on record tells of him and his friend Roger, who with a host of others enjoy Thanksgiving dinner at Alice and Ray's church.

This fantastic feast, plus incidental cleaning, reaps a truckload of garbage which, as a fitting holiday gesture, they haul over to the local dump.

But as anyone who has ever heard the song (everyone?) should remember, it is closed for the holiday. SO they throw it over a cliff which two passing motorists witness and consequently report. Our boys are handcuffed and arrested.

After police polygraph and measure the garbage, pig-dogs smell it out, cement casts of their tracks are set and the aerial photography is completed. Arlo and Roger are convicted of first degree littering by a blind judge (emboss "IRONY" in gold leaf).

This whole episode gives Arlo a criminal record and keeps him out of the army.

This is all Katy Keene on record, but simply too incredible visually to be creditably realized on film. The whole anti-draft-hassle comes off like a clever Mad Magazine satire.

Cute, occasionally biting but too much of it is downright unlikely (even if it is true: truth being traditionally stranger than fiction, you'll remember) to take seriously.

The film itself, as a whole, is mainly guilty of thematic incongruency.

First, on the aforementioned flippant satiric level we have Arlo's once-over-easy draft recipe. But then, on a serious and more straightforward, intelligent approach we are presented with the touching truism of Ray and Alice and others like them: time-scarred 1955-Bohemian types, desperate to keep pace with the youth revolution.

A stunning rendition of Joni Mitchell's "Songs of Aging Children," in a snow-bound graveyard sequence, is the high-point and seems to be the real motif of the film. Here we have an appropriately occasionally understanding shot of a bundled Alice and Ray—jowls pending, wrinkles and fleshy forearms notwithstanding—huddled together under a black umbrella.

This whole theme, as effectively founded in the film is one of those things you will feel sadder but wiser for having seen: a plaintive plea, a crescendo of regret from all the over-age types who had a finger in the making of "Alice."

In a Village club where Arlo's talents are paid for in scant applause and day-old eclairs, Ruth, the fortyish owner, tries to make Arlo.

"You're not so unusual," she tells him.

"We used to do that. All of us." Then she raves on about "the Movement," which for some reason drew laughs from the preview audience. But there doesn't really seem to be too much very funny about a young spirit in an old head. If the prospect of some old woman preaching revolution still bowls you over, see this film again in 30 years, then choke on your lower plate.

If "Alice" is a good film and not an excellent one, it is also a victim of misappropriated intention. On whose part is a little harder to say.

Maybe Arthur Penn is not completely at fault. He does some really incredible things with camera approach, especially his last tragic shot of Alice alone. No surprise, but effectively appalling.

And he has a lovely, short marriage contrasting the sedate calm of several New England churches on Thanksgiving Day to the loud quiet of Alice's, where "Amazing Grace" is the musical theme of the day. But it ain't as if he's gone completely artsy-craftsy for the sake of film art. There is a motorcycle racing sequence which serves to establish friction in Ray and Alice's marriage.

But Penn seemed intent on two birds (since there must have been a quieter, less intrusive way to split Ray and Alice) and apparently injected the motor-psycho junk for the benefit of those who expect to see hippies as Wild Ones who freak around frantically.

The scene is reasonably imaginative for a straight-action thing, but next to the rest of the film comparatively pedestrian (equal maybe to one of the better American-International bike flicks). But its greatest offense is that it is unnecessary.

One thing in particular to be thankful to Arthur Penn for, though, despite anything else he is guilty of, is that he has spared us his version of a "trip," which never seems to be cinematically successful, as is evidenced by the otherwise excellent "Easy Rider," which tries to pass off some frenzy of editing as an acid experience.

Dede Allen, the film's editor (who worked with Penn on "bonnie and Clyde" and the even more fantastic "Rachel Rachel) is one of the best things" Alice" has going for it.

The film is unabashedly episodic, not unlike the life it simulates (not to be confused with the lackluster periodical of the same name). Footage flows stoned from life-lump to next hump.

We fly from a teeny bopper who wants to "make it" with Arlo "cause you'll probably get to be an album" (her credentials include the drummer at the Democratic Convention) to an army induction center where Arlo's urine specimen is hardly enough to fill a shotglass.

"That ain't enough" the sergeant barks.

"That's all I had," replies Arlo, who, like Major Barbara, must resort to contributions.

The screenplay is intelligent and for the most part delightful. The author has foregone the opportunity to make the whole thing a big Neil-Simon guffaw one-liner shit. Its humor is a touching human comedy. An Americana conglomeration. Like Arlo's observation, "seems like schools have a habit of dropping out around me."

As far as performances go, the only really professional ones (in this case, professional being synonymous with beautiful) are turned in by Pat Quinn and James Broderick as Alice and Ray. They ring touching and true throughout.

A dissolving marriage may not be much in the way of thematic courage, but it makes for a pretty delectable main course in "Alice's Restaurant." Overwhelming hassle; Alice's lament: "I guess I'm the bitch of too many pups. I couldn't take them all milking me."

Ray and Alice decide to be married again, and in their own church. After the wedding, where hash seems to be a buffet favorite, Ray becomes drunk and belligerent and pitiful. Uncorked, he bubbles over with unrealized dreams of communes in Vermont and together friends together, frantically grabbing at guests to stay a little longer. Beautifully pathetic.

Also outstanding is Michael McClanathan as Shelly, the zonked, OD-bound doper. He flies high about the stock character he is stuck with (apparently left over from "A Hatful of Rain") and is torturedly perfect.

No one else seems to bother with acting much in "Alice," most especially Arlo. But they all behave appropriately enough In front of the camera and succeed in making the film a human experience instead of a theatrical one.

"Alice's Restaurant," all tolled, serves up a hearty between-meal snack. But it won't appease a healthy intellectual appetite for long. So you people out for a really honest film concerning As It Is will just have to sit uptight on "Easy Rider" for a while.

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