

At Northland Theatre

"Fahrenheit 451"

Joe Fineman

1967

Once, one approached Truffaut with satiate expectancy, awaiting only to be chewed up and spat upon beneath the marquee. In stark wonderment and in bitter tears one expected to be engulfed by the pleasures of cinema at its best. The mystery about him is depleted and this precious auteur now rates the same scrutiny as his far western brothers with only a slightly higher handicap. His reputation has been defiled through the medium of "Fahrenheit 451," Truffaut's latest endeavor, from the novel of the same name by Ray Bradbury.

With some fanfare and expense, 451, an aberration by previous standards, has, in one swoop, incinerated a nearly sainted image. I suspect a mismatch of director and subject matter. The screenplay is adequate and at least up to Mr. Truffaut's previous high standards yet the plot seems inadaptably to the screen. However, he took his plunge and wound up being unable to swim. This rigid plot might have taken up life under the deft hand of John Frankenheimer who lends buoyancy to particularly inane subject matter. Truffaut requires expanse, a deeper purpose, a more profound *raison d'être*. "Fahrenheit 451" is not that vehicle.

"Fahrenheit 451" is bound up with utopia and the suppression and elimination of books as a seasoning on life. Firemen are the enforcers who "search and destroy" objectionable material. Briefly, Oskar Werner is cast as Montag, a different fireman whose doubts about the system are encouraged by Clarisse, a perky neighbor, played by Julie Christie. Miss Christie, in a most unsuitable dual role, also is Montag's wife, a chronic denizen on the path of least resistance whose submission to this eyeball society is complete. The culture is based on the perfidiousness of people and where the fascist minority prevails. Cyril Cusack, as the fire chief, briefly recites his conviction that books embellish reality, cause unhappiness and are a curse to mankind which must be wiped out.

Mr. Werner forges another rung in his rise to stardom with a convincing performance as a stiff receptacle for his superior's voracious ego. The part is tailored to Germanic characterization which Werner more than adequately accomplishes. Cusack is only a distraction as the society's pledged brother. Miss Christie seems to have either run the gamut of her acting potential or have been severely misguided in her valiant effort to sustain her cult. Neither the characters of Clarisse or Linda are of the quality which she is so used to exhibiting.

On the positive side, Truffaut manages to bring forth the mood of the civilization in much the same way that Godard was in "Alphaville." The venal passivity which has overcome the land is starkly focused on in the titles with brisk *agencieux* shots of television antennas accompanied by verbal titles. The visual is a salient theme and Truffaut's colors are tangy and at the same time splashed with enough repetition to drive home the utter contempt for the literate deviates. To combat the inevitable boredom the pawns have adopted fetishes to depersonalize their swift atrophy.

Truffaut maintains his mastery over children but lapses in other cinematic techniques which has nearly become his trademark. Though previously unaccustomed to the fade or dissolve and certainly the patriarch or the quick or jump cut, Truffaut has evolved into Hollywoodism, perhaps only to tell an updated adventure story.

After reviewing his comments in "Cahiers Du Cinema" on the making of this picture one can't help detect a pessimistic tone, even an informal apology to his respondents. I'll make no predictions, but if only because box office response has been disappointing, I suspect a prompt return by Mr. Truffaut to pre "451" format.

Look for these films coming in the next month: Mai Zetterling's "Loving Couples," "Night Games" by the same lady, "Goal," "Blow Up" Antonioni's color masterpiece, "Ulysses" at the Krim for three days in March, "Taming of The Shrew" March 22 at the Northland.

And watch for the Ann Arbor Film Festival March 7-11.

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