

Film deals with faith, hope

'Tender Mercies' optimistic

By STEVE CARR
Staff Writer

Tender Mercies is a film about faith. Not just religious faith, but faith in people and humanity.

Unfortunately, Universal Studios could have been a little less cynical in distributing the film. When *Tender Mercies* first came out, it received little exposure. Only after receiving positive reviews and developing a word-of-mouth following did the film start to do well.

Review

Tender Mercies is the story of a down-and-out country singer, Mac Sledge, ditched by a supposed friend in a run-down hotel. His strength and money sapped by alcohol, Sledge starts to work for the young war widow who owns the hotel, doing odd jobs to pay for room and board. Sledge eventually marries the widow.

The nice thing about *Tender Mercies* is its crescendo of optimism. Not once does Sledge fall back on his bottle. And even though he is put through a lot, his character grows strong both during and after a dilemma. This is a far cry from the obligatory "falling off the wagon" scene that has become a manipulative cliché in this sort of character study.

The portrayal of Sonny, the widow's child, is also uplifting. Instead of being obnoxious or resentful, Sonny grows to

love and respect Sledge. His only doubts come when his peers goad him because his mother is married to a has-been and a drunkard. But Sonny manages to quell his doubts and accept Sledge as a father.

The other developments also contain positive aspects. A group of mean-looking thugs in a van drives up and asks to see Sledge. The audience is sure that they are going to beat him to a pulp. As it turns out, he returns to singing because of them.

Perhaps *Tender Mercies* is naive and a bit Pollyannaish. There is no violence, no chopping down a character just to bring him back up. The people in the film are presented with events — sometimes good, sometimes bad — and the more we find out about the people, the better they seem.

Yet it is hard to call something naive when it seems to know all our doubts and cynicism. The movie knows that the audience expects Sledge to hit the bottle again. It knows we expect some disillusioned fan to come barging in on Sledge to wreak his revenge. It knows we expect the kid to suddenly break out screaming "I hate you, I hate you," to his father. *Tender Mercies* is aware of these realistic mishaps, but it plays upon the audience's preconceptions. How can something be called naive when it makes our sophisticated look rather ridiculous?

With Mac, Robert Duvall adds another finely drawn character to his

gallery of performances. Perhaps this underrated actor will finally receive the recognition he deserves. Duvall gives Sledge a certain vulnerability that greatly enhances both the character and the movie.

In addition, Duvall sang all his own songs and even wrote some of them.

Newcomer Tess Harper gives the young war widow a quiet determination and uncomplicated conviction. Real-life country star Betsy Buckley turns in admirable performances in both the acting and singing departments, matching Duvall's versatility.

Premiere American writer Horton Foote has produced an excellent script, one that keeps its characters simple, yet never mocks them or condescends to them. Foote is perhaps best known for his superb screen adaptation of *To Kill A Mockingbird*. *Tender Mercies* is every bit as good, if not better.

Director Bruce Beresford gives the film its savvy. Known to American audiences for directing *Breaker Morant*, Beresford continually plays with some all-too-conventional clichés and comes up with some surprisingly warm realizations. If the screenplay is perhaps too bright, too believing in faith, Beresford is the perfect foil. He continually turns his camera in a sly, mocking style, yet he never infringes upon the warmth and humanity so evident in *Tender Mercies*.

Actors spark taut 'Gorky Park'

By SHERYL THOMAS
Staff Writer

Gorky Park is a beautiful film, full of the vibrant melancholia that drives people caught in a seemingly inescapable situation. From the eerie tinkling piano keys that accompany the powerful black-and-white frames of the credits to the unpatriotic release of hyperactive sabres at the movie's end, *Gorky Park* retains the characteristically Russian feeling of euphoria being smothered by a deadly yellow fog.

The feeling of people struggling to escape is subtly conveyed by the film's stars, William Hurt and Joanna Pacula.

Hurt follows a low-keyed performance as Nick in *The Big Chill* with the even more introspective Arkady Renko in *Gorky Park*. Hurt's portrayal of the icy chief investigator is smooth and calculated. He rarely smiles, and even when he speaks in what should be a highly emotional moment, he retains the unruffled countenance appropriate for a man who should know everything, yet knows nothing.

Review

But Hurt is able to keep the audience's faith because he somehow conveys to the audience the sense that he is alive and thinking constantly, always prepared to act.

As talented and precise as Hurt is, his performance is surpassed by that of newcomer Joanna Pacula. Pacula plays the fiery Irina Asanova, a Russian malcontent whose sole desire is to escape the clutches of her homeland. At first, Pacula's performance seems shallow and flat. But as the story develops, it becomes clear that Pacula's apparent flatness is merely an illustration of the deadness that Irina feels while she slowly suffocates under the Soviet regime.

As Irina's departure nears, Pacula brings out the vitality and determination that has been percolating quietly beneath Irina's steely, impenetrable exterior. The beauty of Pacula's performance is that she only hints at Irina's determination to defy the Soviet government and flee to America. Instead of making an obvious statement, Pacula lets a twitch of the lip, a fiery glare in her eyes and a self-confident gait say more than the script ever could.

Gorky Park not only depicts life inside the U.S.S.R., but it

also makes a peculiar statement about Russians and Americans. Arkady and Irina brim with a vitality that is dying a slow and torturous death under a stifling Communist blanket.

Conversely, the Americans, Jack Osborne and William Kirwill, who know the privilege of freedom, are amazingly lackluster and uninteresting.

Osborn, played by Lee Marvin, is driven only by money and what it can buy. He has no depth and, most depressingly, no desire for anything but the dollar.

Unfortunately, Osborne is uninteresting due to a shoddy and disappointing performance by Marvin rather than poor character development in the screenplay. Marvin has confused Osborne's self-assured "cool" with bored blandness. Marvin maintains a monotone voice and wooden countenance throughout the movie, never giving a glimpse of the suppressed vitality which distinguishes Hurt's coolness from Marvin's.

Brian Dennehy plays the New York City detective William Kirwill. Kirwill, like Osborne, lacks depth and is motivated by only one thing — revenge. Kirwill haphazardly suspects everyone for his brother's death in *Gorky Park*. He lashes out at these suspects, whether he has probable cause or not. But the lack of character depth is, in this case, the fault of the screenplay. Dennehy has no time to develop Kirwill's character. His appearances are sporadic and really do not contribute anything to the story, except when he miraculously saves Arkady from a knife.

Aside from the faulty development of Kirwill's character, Dennis Potter has very effectively adapted Martin Cruz Smith's novel *Gorky Park* into a screenplay. Potter has preserved the meat of the story and cut out all the fat. Fans of Smith's novel are able to get a sense both of an insider's knowledge of the action and of never having read the book at all. One begins to wonder if what Potter excluded from his screenplay really contributes to Smith's novel at all.

Gorky Park is a fast-paced and occasionally disjointed film, constantly jumping from one scene to another with no real transitions. But this style is necessary, because so much action must be crammed into 20 minutes.

For those who would rather not spend the money for a second viewing or the book, *Gorky Park* is still worthwhile. The action is followable, James Horner's music is gorgeous and the superb performances of William Hurt and Joanna Pacula recommend the movie by themselves.



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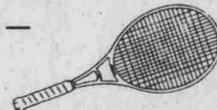
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