

## Film Review

# Altman's *Streamers*

When you look at a painting, what you see is as much what's inside you as what is there on the canvas. It's even a more revealing show of identity than looking at a mirror, which can only show externals. When we look at art and see, little or big parts of our guts surface like koi feeding in a Japanese garden pool.

*Streamers* brings this home in a hard way; for some the movie is peripherally about Vietnam and centrally about issues of war and its personal significance; for others the film illustrates the tragic differences between classes in American society and the false feeling that one class can understand another. But the film centers on homosexuality for me, and it's because I'm a homosexual male. Any person who is not will find a large part of the film's richness elusive and annoying.

The central quartet of characters is an essay in contrasts: Richie (Mitchell Lichtenstein) is a pretty white boy from New York City who grew up with the haves; he has a quick wit and can be cynical, but he is still vulnerable--and that matters. Billy (Matthew Modine) is superficially as all-American as Richie is a faggot. He set the record for the mile in high school, is tall and handsome in a farm-boy way, he's intelligent, he wears a red letter jacket. But neither character is a stereotype; both actors make the characters transcend the outward banality of the types themselves. Billy's best friend is the affable Roger (David Alan Grier), a handsome intelligent black man wedged between the races. That wedge comes undone for all the characters when Carlyle (Michael Wright) completes the quartet. From a lower class black family, no father, no education, Carlyle's presence points out and pulls out the racial, class-oriented, and sexual incongruities of Roger's relationship with Billy, Billy's relationship with Richie, and Richie's relationship with Billy and Roger.

---

"...Living, breathing presences that you can't ignore whether you like them or not."  
-Godfrey Cheshire

---

The quartet's acting, supplemented by two time-worn war veterans, is superlative. As Godfrey Cheshire pointed out in a very positive review in the *Spectator* (Jan. 19-26, 1984), "Few viewers will be able to watch it casually, abstractedly... Altman doesn't achieve this effect by making his characters sympathetic, he does it by making them palpable. Living, breathing presences that you can't ignore whether you like them or not." These six presences are so vital that the jurors at

the Venice Film Festival made the unprecedented move of splitting the Best Actor award among the six actors.

There's no way to discuss why this is a vital movie without revealing the plot. I'll do this even though Altman said, "To synopsise *Streamers* is not impossible, but I think it is inadvisable." Advice aside, here I go. If you haven't seen the movie, and don't want to know part of the story, stop here.

Essentially *Streamers* is a tragic love story, complete with a twisted triangle of sorts: Richie has fallen in love with Billy, who has finally realized that Richie isn't kidding with all his passes. Roger knows that Billy is gay, and he doesn't want to know. The film's opening

## St. John's Metropolitan Community Church

Come experience God's love by  
worshiping with your Gay & Lesbian  
Brothers and Sisters.

Sunday at 3:00 pm (Singspiration 2:45 pm)  
814 Dixie Trail  
Raleigh, NC  
834-2611

third deals with some of the complications of these problems. Carlyle enters, reads Billy's story immediately, and assumes that Richie is Billy's boy. Later he figures that Billy and Roger share Richie's attentions. The story climaxes when Richie asks Billy and Roger to leave the barracks so he and Carlyle can have sex; they refuse to leave, an argument results, and Carlyle stabs Billy. You may not feel much sympathy for Billy or Richie from this bare sketch, but the movie hurts before the climax, during, and afterwards.

---

. . . Richie's desperation becomes our own, resonantly recalling our own past in similar situations.

---

Richie's struggles with Billy are painful thrusts in places we want to forget. He's too stereotypic (broken home, sharp repartee, baby powder), but his helplessness and stupidity in the face of his love (see *STREAMERS*, p. 10)