

Quiz Show questions television's morality

The enduring popularity of quiz shows, such as the current evening favorites "Jeopardy" and "Wheel of Fortune," reflects America's fascination with seeing itself on television—the "that could be me," play-along-at-home mentality and, of course, the lure of easy money. Robert Redford examines the twin roots of all evil, television and money, in his brilliant film *Quiz Show*.

Quiz Show is based on the game show scandals of 1959, in which the shows *Twenty-One* and *The \$64,000 Question* were exposed as rigged before a Congressional Overnight Committee. John Turturro brilliantly portrays Herbert Stempel, Queens' proud, long-time winner of the show *Twenty-One*, who was forced by the network to take a dive on an easy question to allow a new and more photogenic contestant, Charles Van Doren (Ralph Finnes of recent *Schindler's List* ac-

claim), to take his place as television's "intellectual Joe DiMaggio." Stempel retaliated by alleging that the show was rigged, and Richard Goodwin, played by *Northern Exposure's* Rob Morrow, brought the networks before a Congressional hearing.

Redford depicts the quiz show scandals as a turning point in American culture, a foreshadowing of the cynicism and public distrust that Nixon and the Watergate scandal brought to Washington for good. To Redford, the quiz show scandals represented a test of American values, which were challenged and found lacking.

The opening scene shows with

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caressing close-ups the seduction of a white Chrysler 300D convertible, away from which only through sheer force of will is Goodwin able to tear himself. Van Doren is not quite so strong. In his very first meeting with *Twenty-One* producers Dan Enright (David Paymer) and Al Freedman (Hank Azaria), Van Doren is offered the possibility of becoming the new champion, albeit by illegal methods. After the meeting, he runs down a flight of stairs, with Balhaus's photography capturing through dizzying shots the young Columbia professor's moral confusion. But by the time he reaches the bottom of the stairs, his mind is made up: "\$20,000!" he cries with amazement.

Redford chooses to focus on the relationships and ethical dilemmas of the three main characters, turning Van Doren's situation into a classic father-son struggle. Van Doren desires not only money, but also recognition and a reputation to equal those of his father, the famous literary critic and Pulitzer-Prize winning poet, Mark Van Doren (Paul Scofield). When Charles finally admits his wrongdoing to his father, Redford's talent for recreating family relations, as shown in *Ordinary People*, takes over.

The relationship between Richard Goodwin and Charles Van Doren is equally complicated. Although Goodwin graduated first in his class at Harvard Law, he remains an outsider because of his Jewish background. In reference to their shared Ivy League backgrounds, Van Doren says, "I feel like we speak the same language," but it quickly becomes apparent that they do not. Goodwin is seduced by the Van Dorens' old-money lifestyle, scholarly charm, and intellectual sophistication. It is Goodwin's longing for this unattainable world and desire to protect and preserve it that causes his own moral dilemma over whether to question Van Doren at the committee hearings. His hesitation incurs the wrath of his wife, who calls him "the Uncle Tom of the Jews."

John Turturro gives one of the finest performances as Herbert Stempel, again opening up the ugly Pandora's box of anti-Semitism in America. Turturro plays an annoying, paranoid nerd with genuine humor and yet at the same time, compels us to feel compassion for the man who has been wronged because he is not one of the beautiful people. He has, as one woman remarks, "a face for radio," a comment as cogent in today's realm of photogenic but lackluster political candidates as it was for the Kennedy-Nixon presidential campaign of 1960. He observes to Goodman that game shows always follow a Jew with a Gentile, and the Gentile always wins more money. He turns out to be right.

The fine acting by the three central characters is beautifully complemented by supporting characters, who add to the film's richness. Paul Scofield gracefully portrays the eminent man of letters Mark Van Doren, whose intellectual prowess, humor and simple good sense seem like a beacon of settled convictions in his son's sea of moral confusion. Stempel's wife lends to her husband, almost entirely without words, a sense of dignity he does not even seek for himself. And Martin Scorsese plays a wonderfully slick and cynical executive of Geritol, *Twenty-One's* sponsor.

In fact, few American vices escape unscathed in this film, from commercialism to materialism, from anti-Semitism to judicial inequality, from intellectual elitism to anti-intellectualism, but it is television that takes the greatest beating. Goodman comments with prescience, "I thought we were going to get television; the truth is, television is going to get us."

In many ways, television has got us, but with films like *Quiz Show* and its intelligent commentary on our society, there remains hope for film as a medium and potential for television.

Quiz Show is currently playing at Blue Ridge 10 (the \$1.50 movie theater).

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