

by George McCartney

False Redeemers

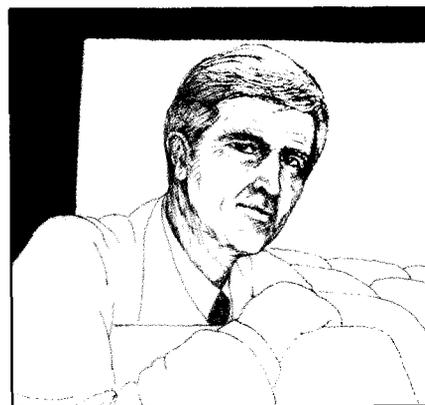
American film would be poorer without Robert Redford. As an actor and as a director, he has given us some vastly entertaining movies along with a handful of genuinely original and challenging dramas. *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) and *The Sting* (1973) will never lose their appeal. *The Candidate* (1972) is arguably the best film ever made about the inner workings of a political campaign. Two or three of his directing efforts have deservedly attained classic status, especially *Quiz Show* (1994), his ingenious examination of America's class structure through the prism of early television. Yet, as an actor, Redford can be exasperating. He often seems to be condescending to his characters, holding back as if he thought it gauche to be too intense. True, this self-regarding reticence has worked in some films. It added a element of mystery to *The Natural* (1984). In other films, however, he seems puritanically aloof, a man who doesn't want to soil his hands in the mess of other peoples' lives. Watch him in *The Horse Whisperer* (1998), for example.

In *The Last Castle*, Redford has been encouraged to emphasize this aspect of his screen persona. Doing so, he becomes a black hole at the center of the film. The other actors are left to revolve around him in varying degrees of nearly religious awe.

The implausible plot centers on three-star Gen. Eugene Irwin, who has been sentenced to ten years in a military prison for insubordination. As the film begins, he is being marched under guard across a jailyard to the warden's office. Unaccountably, he is wearing his decorated uniform—an interesting choice of garb given his disgrace. In short order, we are given his story, compliments of the 1,200 prisoners milling about the grounds. Presumably, they are on recess so they can witness Redford's grand entrance. As different voices speak, we learn that he has distinguished himself as a POW in Vietnam, where his unbending courage in the face of torture inspired his fellow prisoners with the hope they needed to survive. He has served with similar honor in various campaigns around the world, including Bosnia. He even wrote a thought-

ful book on military matters, *The Burden of Command*. Recently, however, he has blundered badly, disobeying his Commander in Chief—the President. He conducted a foray into Burundi to capture a nasty warlord, managing to lose eight men in what turned out to be a fruitless venture. For this, he has been sentenced to hard time in a maximum security institution filled with meatheads, retards, and thugs. Not a likely fate for a three-star general, you say? Ah, but the noble Irwin thinks he deserves it. When a fellow officer explains how he could easily be spared this indignity, he flatly rejects the offer. "What I did was wrong," he solemnly declares, his jaw set. And that's that.

In the prison, he meets his opposite in the warden, Colonel Winter. James Gandolfini plays Winter as a stertorous martinet, snuffling and sighing noisily with each new turn of events. He is perpetually simmering and can barely contain his steam. He prides himself on waging war against the "animals" under his none-too-gentle care. The slightest infraction by one of the inmates is met with either a hail of rubber bullets or high-pressure hosing from a water cannon. These tactics are supposed to be relatively harmless, but Winter's men have managed to wield them to lethal effect in at least two cases. Like all bullies, Winter is easily impressed by higher authority. When Irwin shows up on his doorstep, his welcome is almost servile. The man may be his prisoner, but Winter knows his record, has read his book, and feels honored by his presence, however diminished. Irwin, however, rebuffs him at first sight. After proudly showing him his collection of war memorabilia, including sword, guns, and tin soldiers, Winter steps into the next room to get Irwin's book so the general can sign it for him. Without bothering to lower his voice, Irwin remarks to the lieutenant guarding him that such collections are kept by men who have never seen battle. Winter hears this, and the die is cast: Winter will do his worst and Irwin will stand up to him. It doesn't take a genius to predict that the men in the prison—Winter's animals—will have their dignity restored by Irwin's insouciant leadership. Of course,



The Last Castle

Produced and distributed by
DreamWorks
Directed by Rod Lurie
Screenplay by David Scarpa

Training Day

Produced by Outlaw Productions
Directed by Antoine Fuqua
Screenplay by David Ayer
Released by Warner Bros.

it helps that every one of them is a diamond in the rough. They have all been waiting for Irwin's burnishing hand to bring their innate honor to a dazzling luster.

Irwin first proves his leadership by physically stopping a guard from clubbing a hapless prisoner. "You're better than that," he tells the startled jailkeeper. For this outrage, Winter assigns General Irwin the task of moving a rock pile, stone by 25-pound stone, across some 20 yards of the prison grounds. As always happens at such moments in such films, the other prisoners form an appraising gauntlet, taking bets on whether or not he will stay the course in the heat of the noonday sun. Irwin has no choice but to remove his shirt, which gives Redford a twofold opportunity. He gets to show off his buff physique (impressive for a 64-year-old) and, at the same time, reveal his character's scourged back, a roadmap of scars inflicted by his Vietnamese captors. This sight elicits knowing approval from his fellow inmates. Needless to say, Irwin comes through his challenge manfully and wins the discipleship of all the prisoners, save the cynical Yates (Mark Ruffalo), whose father just happened to be in the same POW prison with Irwin. For

reasons never made clear, this young man is still angry with his late father and has transposed his displeasure to Irwin. He is destined, of course, to become the Judas of the piece. As you may already have guessed, the film is shot through with Christ symbolism.

What happens next would be marvelously absurd if Lurie had any trace of humor. Taking advantage of his hard-won respect, Irwin decides to help his admirers regain theirs. He has the men build a wall with the rock pile. Winter counters by ordering his guards to bulldoze it. When one of the prisoners tries to block the bulldozer, Winter has him shot with a rubber bullet, aimed lethally at his head. Irwin, whose record of accomplishment is universally applauded and whose innumerable friends occupy stratospheric places, decides that there is only one thing to do: He must lead the prisoners in an uprising against the warden. Gathering the men together, he plots to take control first of the jailyard, then the surveillance towers, the prison helicopter, and—finally—the flag. As the men look on wonderingly, he admits that securing the helicopter is “going to be a bitch.” No kidding.

Last year, Lurie gave us *The Contender*, an insufferably pious film about liberal rectitude. You can see why he chose Redford for this year’s outing. In recent films, the erstwhile Sundance Kid has been playing parts that seem to be warm-ups for canonization. In *The Last Castle*, he gets his wish and more, as he is elevated to the status of savior. Now, I am fully in favor of narratives that echo the ur-narrative of our culture. When redeemers become this smugly self-righteous, however, they make damnation look like a blessing.

Lurie seems to think he’s making another *Bridge on the River Kwai* mixed with some elements from *Cool Hand Luke* and perhaps a tincture of *Tunes of Glory*. But he has neither the insight nor the wit to handle material like this. He has absolutely no talent for registering human ambiguity, a talent essential to such narratives, especially those that employ Messianic undertones. A mortal would have to be either a fool or a madman not to question both the legitimacy of such a call and his ability to answer it. Who would claim with certainty to be able to distinguish between God’s will and his own, between selfless vocation and arrogant selfishness? Lurie and Redford, that’s who.

Now that Denzel Washington has as-

cended to star status, he is no doubt beset by the same temptation that bedevils Redford. In Washington’s case, the temptation has taken a specific form. For more than a decade, he has been promising to become our era’s Sidney Poitier: the black man with bottomless reserves of decency and a marked penchant for self-abnegation. It’s the Stepin Fetchit routine turned inside out. The Poitier school of acting rejects comical subservience and demands instead unfaltering nobility from performers of color. But this is typecasting no less confining than Fetchit’s and lacks even the foil of his amusing shuck and jive.

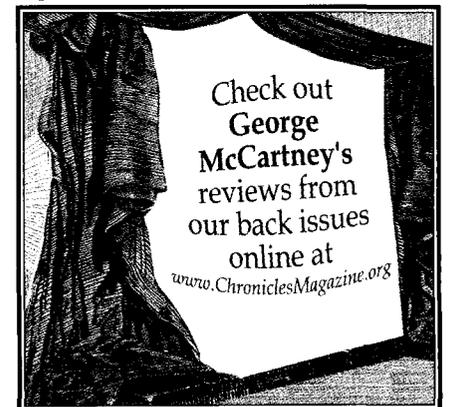
With *Training Day*, Washington has wisely taken a hall pass from the Poitier curriculum, using the opportunity to get into some very creative mischief. As narcotics detective Alonzo Harris, he plays a seductive monster who routinely abuses his police power, all the while rationalizing his vile methods with a sweetly infectious smile. He sports a skull cap on his noggin and a leather jacket on his broad shoulders. A silver cross dangles from his neck, and a diamond earring sparkles from his ear. When he laughs, he throws back his head and his gleaming pearly whites dominate his face. Is his dental exuberance a sign of camaraderie or menace? He looks and moves just like the drug dealers he has been deputized to arrest. Of course, this is an undercover cop’s *modus operandi*. But as he cuts one corner after another, beating up some people, letting others go, pocketing stashes of this and that on his rounds, you can’t tell whose side he is on. Whenever he is asked about his behavior, he flashes his steroidal teeth and croons, “It’s all good.” This is certainly true of Washington’s performance, though his character remains a mystery.

The film’s first 40 minutes are about as clever as any drug drama I have seen and quite a bit better than most. Thereafter, you cannot help feeling cheated. After a rocketing start boosted by Washington’s explosive performance, the whole enterprise fizzles to the level of standard TV fare. The plot swerves lazily into car and foot chases, followed by gunfights between the absolutely good and the unspeakably bad—in other words, the usual bunkum.

The film begins with an interesting premise. It sets out to dramatize a rookie’s first day as an undercover narcotics officer. The neophyte is Ethan Hawke as Jake Hoyt, and his first assignment is to

be Alonzo’s partner. For someone who is supposed to have spent 19 months as an uniformed patrolman, he is incredibly naive about what he is getting into. But you suspend your disbelief, knowing that he is meant to be your surrogate. You are about to see Alonzo’s world through Hoyt’s innocent eyes. In no time at all, the older man leads Hoyt down the rabbit hole of drug enforcement. Forced to join Alonzo in rousting college kids, taking their marijuana away, and turning them loose, Hoyt finds himself compromised on every side. Alonzo explains that good narcs have to protect the sheep from the wolves; to do so, they have to be wolves themselves. He insists that Hoyt smoke a pipeful of the pot. After all, a narc has “to know and love drugs.” When Hoyt refuses, Alonzo puts his gun to his head. “You’d be dead, you ever refuse to take a hit from some drug dealer,” he snarls. The next moment he smiles tolerantly: It is just training. Not to fail the test, Hoyt takes the pipe. Once he’s under the influence, things get much weirder. The partners visit a dealer’s home so Alonzo can steal his ill-gotten gains. Well, he needs funds to do his police work, doesn’t he? He needs to setup buys and all that, right? Next, he takes the rookie to see a man who is either an undercover cop or a drug dealer—or possibly both. As the older men reminisce and talk business, Hoyt is left to wonder what’s what. When Alonzo playfully calls Hoyt his “nigger,” we know we are in an Alice-in-Wonderland world where nothing is as it seems. White is black, and black, white; upper is lower, and lower, upper. As for distinguishing virtue from vice, forget about it.

So far, so dizzying. You begin to feel that, yes, this is the nightmare our inane drug policies have unleashed on our body politic. Then the film loses its nerve. Too bad. We need more convincing portrayals of our drug war’s unacceptable collateral damage.



by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

'69 Plus 40

Sam Nash pushed the empty beer bottle away across the knife-scarred table. "I'm ready to hunt bulls," he said. "We need to be making tracks for the mountain soon, before it gets too dark to put a camp in up there."

Jim McCorkle set his chin forward but didn't answer right away. He'd ordered black coffee and refused a third refill when Sam was already on the second beer. "I'm ready when you are," he said finally.

Beyond the plateglass window, tall cottonwoods stained orange and yellow followed the curve of an invisible creek across a green meadow on which brown hay bales lay evenly spaced. Past the meadow, buff-colored foothills shored up the dark frontal face of the mountains to make a platform for the granite peaks farther back in the range to stand on. The peaks were dusted with snow where the rock wasn't too steep to hold it, and a rime of snow showed along the top of the timbered wall overlooking the valley. Jim didn't like the snow and cold. He'd had enough of being wet and uncomfortable in Vietnam, 40 years ago. From where they hung on the wall behind the bar, the mounted elk and moose and deer heads could see the mountains through the window, too. Their glassy eyes looked farseeing and sad, as if they had a longing to be back there.

The drive from Sheridan up to the campsite was 55 miles, and the hunters had to chain up for the last ten. A foot of snow lay between the forest trees, and a light snow fell as Sam and Jim unhooked the trailer from the pickup truck, cranked the camper up, and fixed a camp. They were former Marine Corps buddies and still worked well together, never needing to ask each other where help was wanted or how, the way it had been for them in Vietnam since before Sam was hit in the thigh by a Cong sniper and Jim tourniqueted the wound with his belt and piggybacked him deeper into the jungle where Charlie couldn't find them. When the bedrolls had been spread on the bunks and Sam was cutting fire logs with a chainsaw, Jim brought his new rifle from the truck and laid it carefully in its leather case lined with lambswool across the foldaway table inside the

camper. Jim had spent a year and a half building the rifle himself, and he was very proud of it. The gun was a .375 caliber with a Mauser action, powerful enough to take the largest and most dangerous game in Africa but almost unknown to Wyoming hunters, in spite of its surgical perforation of elk and deer. Although Jim had been in love with the idea of the hunt since he was four or five years old, the thrill for him in hunting elk this year was the chance to test the new rifle in the field.

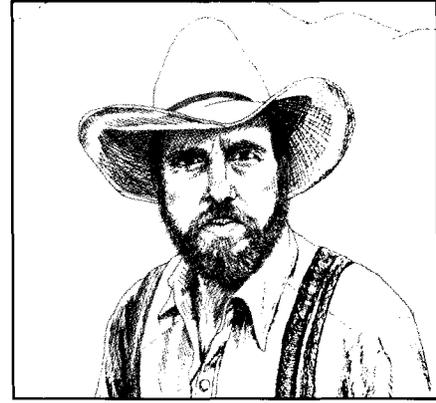
It was dark before the camp was secure. Sam produced a bottle of single-malt scotch, and they drank a glass apiece before heating supper on the gas stove. For his supper, Jim needed only boiling water to add to the MREs he ordered from an Army-Navy store—all the food he carried with him into the field. After eating, they washed up and sat outside in heavy jackets around the blazing fire Sam had built within the circle of trees beneath the hanging stars.

"You remember the night hit on that ammo dump the summer before we left country in '69?" Jim asked. "Five thousand 250-pound bombs going up in a red-and-orange mushroom cloud and the shock wave like a halo all around the damn thing."

"I remember it," Sam told him, shortly, "but after 40 years, I don't think about it."

An hour before first light the next morning, the thermometer on the wall of the camper read six degrees. The gas heater had gone off during the night, the sink was seized up, and all the supplies that could freeze had. When Jim awoke, the neck of the mummy bag crackled with hoarfrost where his breath had frozen. He got out of it as fast as he could and began pulling woolen service pants on over the long johns. "My knee's swollen up the size of a grapefruit this morning," he said. Sam, who was on his knees in red suspenders over long johns trying to restart the heater, didn't answer him, and Jim ate 400 mg of Ibuprofen to reduce the swelling.

The gas cookstove worked fine. They heated water for coffee on the burner and ate cereal with hot water added to it out of tin bowls. The sky was pink in the east



and the stars had faded out overhead when they left the trailer, wearing their hunter's orange coats and carrying the guns still in the cases. The cold stung their noses and burned their fingers inside the gloves as they climbed up to the bench seat of Sam's pickup, left running for ten minutes already in the steam cloud of its own exhaust. Sam set the gun case muzzle down on the floorboard and unzipped it below the forward lens of the telescopic sights. "OK," he said, "let's go find us a couple of elk to shoot."

All morning they drove on the two-track roads, looking for tracks on either side in the snow and not finding any except for those of rabbits and squirrels, a few deer, and two moose. A little before ten the wind got up, whipping the snow into scalloped patterns and trailing banners of snow from the highest peaks. Though they met other hunters on the road, no opening-morning shots echoed in the granite basins around.

"The damn wind isn't helping any," Sam remarked, cheerfully.

"I think it's a dead end," Jim told him.

Sam set his coffee cup back in its holder.

"Don't start with that now, Jim," he said. "You swore the last time you wouldn't do it again."

"I think they've gone over the face already. We've driven three hours without cutting a single track."

"Even if you're right, there's bound to be stragglers we can get onto. I'm hunting bulls this week, and I mean to shoot one if I have to put in a spike camp and hike a hundred miles to do it."

Jim McCorkle didn't answer him. Instead, he put his finger through the part-way-open gun case and explored with his finger end the expertly machined action of the rifle he had spent the past two winters constructing. As well as it had fired at