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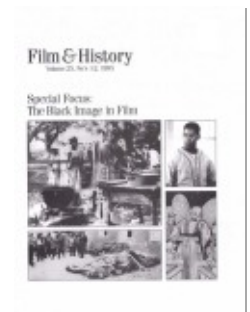
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*Braveheart Wins Two Golden Statuettes* (review)

Robert Fyne

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# *Braveheart* Wins Two Golden Statuettes

(Produced and directed by Mel Gibson. Paramount Pictures; 179 minutes)

When it comes to recreating historical events, few industries can match the unlimited resources of Hollywood, whose deep-lens cameras never miss a sprocket, producing motion pictures that combine star power, entertainment, and profit. As for the facts, just follow the scriptwriters' nimble fingers tapping authoritatively on their QWERTY keyboard sturning out the "truth" for audiences everywhere. Certainly, everybody knows that F. Murray Abraham, a jealous court musician, poisoned Mozart. Look at Kevin Costner, our nimble New Orleans district attorney who with some help from Ockham's razor quickly solved the Kennedy assassination. Don't forget Matthew Broderick and Denzel Washington, the two bluecoats responsible for the Union victory at Gettysburg. Give Wallace Berry some credit! Wasn't he the adipose adventurer who helped John Boles deliver General Garcia's message? Speaking of waistlines, do not pooh-pooh General Leslie Groves. While working on the Manhattan Project, he quickly shed fifty pounds from his pudgy frame when Paul Newman stepped into his shoes. What about hedonistic Marlene Dietrich? Wasn't she the German-born scarlet empress who set the standards for Slavic intransigence?

Need another example? Take a peek at Paramount Pictures' thirteenth century, Scottish adventure yarn, *Braveheart*, the spare-no-expense or mountain scenery epic that recently was awarded two accolades from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences brethren. Starring, produced, and directed by the Australian-raised, blue-eyed Mel Gibson, the photoplay, written by Randall Wallace, purports to recreate the life and times of Sir William Wallace, the Scotsman who led his people in a protracted struggle against the existing British rule by organizing an army of the commons that routed the English garrison and for a year, ruled Scotland.

Defeated at the famous longbow battle at Falkirk (1298), Wallace remained at large until his capture (1305) and subsequent public execution. Overall, these events form

a compact history lesson, but other factors were responsible for the film's popularity. How did the moguls pull it off? Why did millions of cash-spending denizens jam into their multicinemax emporiums to see a three-hour primer about Scottish history?

Most viewers, of course, enjoy vicarious thrills and *Braveheart* has pulled out every cinematic stop including illicit romance, unbridled heroism, gorgeous wide-angled photography, and a cast of thousands clashing in thundering hand-to-hand combat to create a storyline that fuses the rebound qualities of any Bugs Bunny cartoon with the worst shenanigans of every *Die Hard* saga. While the film teems with horrific scenes of decapitation, disembowelment,

— article continues page 76 —

– *Braveheart* continued from page 58 –

immolation, impalement, and garrote, there is also room for boy-loves-girl tenderness, long walks in the countryside, and an ode to Scottish independence. Saddled on his white horse, Mel Gibson looking dapper with his fake, flowing hair and palsy blue war paint is Everyman's vision of acumen and prowess. The English have invaded their homeland. No problem. Mr. Gibson will push them back to Hadrian's Wall. And if some British lord wants to exercise his *droit du seigneur*. Mr. Gibson will slit the man's throat.

The English king, Edward I, plans a nightly assassination. What a joke! Mr. Gibson will entrap the would-be murderers and burn them alive. Need a little romance? Why not take up with Edward's wife and enjoy an after-hours tryst? Who could possibly find out?

Overall, *Braveheart* comes off as one of the most violent screenplays ever made and its gratuitous gory scenes are questionable. How often must a filmgoer watch some English nobleman's severed head bounce across the battlefield like a misplaced bowling ball or another slow death by strangulation? How about that galloping stallion romping through a lord's bedchamber while his rider swings a deadly ball-and-chain pulverizing the skull of his sleeping victim and plunging out an open window, falling fifty feet into murky water, only to trot away unharmed? Did director Gibson need to spend the last fifteen minutes depicting such an inhuman public execution of William Wallace? Why are veins, intestines, and extremities spewed over the landscape? Who can answer these questions? No doubt *Braveheart* merely reaffirms middle-class America's love affair with violence and Mr. Gibson a smart entrepreneur has satisfied public consumption with his bloody vision and Looney Tunes escapades. Now that the Academy has rewarded Mr. Gibson with two golden statuettes, it is a matter of time before *Braveheart II* roars across the screen, espousing bigger and better barbarism, mayhem, and depredation.

– *The Brightest Light?* continued from page 72 –

propel and interpret as opposed to simply punctuating the film's narrative. In the end, Coppola's financial excesses receive the most attention, especially his poorly conceived decision to purchase Zoetrope Studios as interest rates hovered around 20%. For the historian, *Whom God Wishes* reviews the French New Wave influence on a generation of young American filmmakers, some of whom were the brightest lights in Hollywood, including Coppola, Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg, and George Lucas. Lewis' analysis of the reasons Coppola failed in his attempt to establish an alternative studio to rival the majors, is compared with George Lucas and his more successful effort to design an influential motion picture company, Lucas Film. The book also catalogues the remarkable list of titles associated with Coppola such as *Kagemusha*, *Hammett*, and *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, none of which were box office hits. For the serious student of cinema this book entices us to explore the many innovations Coppola made to the film industry.

Lewis, an associate professor of English at Oregon State University, paints a sad picture of a once great artist, but not as one might expect, that of an aging master forced by mounting debts to crank out undistinguished titles. It appears this may be near the truth, but the films are all unique in form and content. In the final analysis it was Coppola's own style as much as any outside factors that lay the groundwork for his always imminent demise. Yet, he has not fallen victim to Hollywood's demons. He will always be remembered for his successes.

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January 2-5, 1997

### American Historical Association Meeting

This announcement is so good we had to repeat it. For our session for the January 4 New York City meeting of the American Historical Association, Prof. Robert Toplin will chair a distinguished panel. The panel includes the auteur of *Nixon*, Oliver Stone, who will discuss his film. The panel also includes George McGovern and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

*Oliver Stone!*