

THEY SHOOT HORSES DON'T THEY

Sickly Americana of Depression Era ___ 8/10

Novel Horace McCoy

Screenplay by James Poe

Directed by Sydney Pollack

Jane Fonda ... Gloria

Michael Sarrazin ... Robert

Susannah York ... Alice

Gig Young ... Rocky

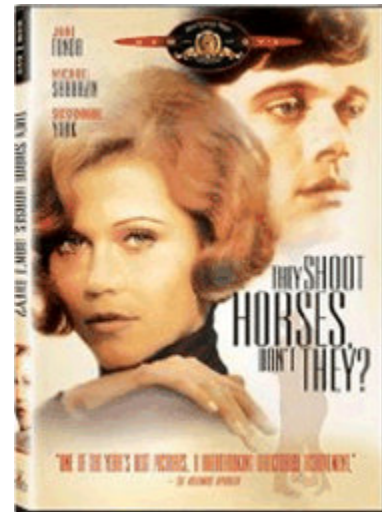
Red Buttons ... Sailor

Bonnie Bedelia ... Ruby

Michael Conrad ... Rollo

Bruce Dern ... James

Gloria Beatty: Maybe it's just the whole world is like central casting. They got it all rigged before you ever show up.



Funny the movies one doesn't see when they're primetime, and perhaps when you're primetime. Why I never made a point of watching *They Shoot Horses Don't They* I don't know. But in 1969 I was in my Randian era and I suspected this one did not have a happy ending—Ayn Rand was a stickler for happy endings... notwithstanding the fate of Kira in her novel, *We the Living*. Anyway, I placed it in the Netflix queue and watched it the other night.

Horses is based on a 1935 book of the same name, that did not sell well in the States but acquired a following in the French existentialist community during and after WW2. The story is of a cultural phenomenon in America during the Depression years called dance marathons or walk marathons, in which contestants would basically stay moving continuously—in this movie, two hour segments followed by ten minutes of rest (but I think longer periods of rest at different times)—on their feet in an arena accompanied by music and other promotions... sometimes for more than a month. The last couple standing would receive a substantial cash prize (if the promoters hadn't run off with the money), in this movie \$1500.

The film begins with what seems like a dream in a pastoral setting, in which a beautiful black horse meets a sad end by rifle; it's unclear the full context of the shooting. Almost as if washed up on a West Coast beach following the dream, Robert (Michael Sarrazin), now older, is walking barefoot carrying a pair of cowboy boots. He eyes the large indoor arena sporting colorful banners announcing an imminent dance contest. It's a rather ethereal scene that transitions down to a sunny, harsh reality.

Robert wanders in to the building to find a dance marathon being set up by promoter Rocky (Gig Young), complete with all the support staff, including a cast of 100 or so couples aiming to shuffle endlessly for the winner-take-all prize. Among the contestants is Gloria (Jane Fonda), a wittily hostile girl whose partner is disqualified for medical reasons. [These events came complete with a coterie of public health professionals and volunteers, slapping a thin veneer of humaneness on what was in truth a wretched, grueling meatgrinder of bones and brains.]

Perhaps one reason I had never seen this movie in the 40 years it has been around lies in my sadness of realizing people actually endured these "contests" and even more pathetic souls paid money to watch the spectacle. Go back to the gladiator games: even if you're not a fan of the Christians what kind of sick bastard can enjoy the infliction of suffering on another sentient being?! Or the self-infliction? Apparently, many kinds. Because, according to what I've read, virtually every American town of more than 50,000 population featured at least one such dance/walk marathon event in those days.

The typical format, apparently, was 45 minutes of "dance" (which could include anything from actual dance, to standing around, to occasional elimination "races," and so on) followed by 15 minutes of rest. During the rest period, the contestants could sleep or eat, or perform hygienic functions. Many people entered these contests in the Depression for the food, which was supposedly quite a bit better than what was available in the bread lines. During the evening hours, when attendance was greater, the contestants had to truly perform dance numbers; impromptu and side performances by individual couples were encouraged, resulting in tips.

Needless to say, such a business attracted a wide range of entrepreneurs, many of them shady—who would use professional dancers and fix the contests, sometimes leaving town with all the prize money, often stiffing local businesses, and otherwise behaving like sleazeballs. In *They Shoot Horses, They Shoot*, Rocky is a cut above the sleazeballs... but it's a small cut. Gig Young won the Academy Award in 1970 for his role as Rocky, and he deserved every bit of it. He's a complex character, seeing at once the good and the bad of what this shabby enterprise is all about.

On the one hand you see local couples desperate for a way out of their poverty of circumstance. The woman of one pair—James and Ruby, played by Bruce Dern and Bonnie Bedelia—is obviously pregnant. So the doctor can disqualify a strong young man (Gloria's partner) for having a sore throat, but subject an attractive woman with child to the chances of miscarriage or worse... on public display. And Rocky lets that go. He also isn't above helping himself to select women contestants for sexual favors. Still he isn't without feeling. He knows what sells, what people truly want, and his job is to give them that.

He sees the sleaze and the long-term damage done to some—scenes between Rocky and Alice (Susannah York, who with Ms. Fonda received an Oscar nomination for her performance) show true compassion. He's fundamentally a showman. Yowza, Yowza, Yowza. (Apparently they really said that.) And he takes pride in what he's accomplishing in the midst of the unfortunate slice of life that's been cut out for him. Is what Rocky does really so different from promoting Ultimate Fighting Championships or, even, the National Football League (NFL)?

My readers should watch some of the "true-sports" specials on the NFL, particularly ones following the medical conditions of some former professional football linemen—those 300-400 pound behemoths, whose skeletons are sometimes so beat to heck they can no longer walk or feed themselves. In general, a pro football player's longevity is many years less than the general population, and it's said that every year spent actively playing the sport ages the player two or more. (So in the rare case a player makes it 20 years in the league, he retires at 40 with a 60-year-old body... usually in constant pain.)

So I'm not going to get on my high horse about dance marathon contests being sleazy and pathetic. But, like Ultimate Fighting Championships today, I feel no connection with

those who "enjoy" the grinding up of folks for its own sake. That's what seems to distinguish the old dance marathons: people in the audience feeling superior or some kind of rush for not being nearly half as bad off as those on the floor. I guess in evaluating the morality of a promoter like Rocky relative to a good share of the fans—some fans were genuinely caring, and sought heroism of a sort—who like seeing humiliation, I'd give the edge to Rocky.

So Gloria winds up with Robert. Then the others out there, reminds me of *Ship of Fools*, *Death of a Salesman*, or some of those other naturalistic "slice-of-sleazy-life" dramas that were the rage in the 30s thru the 50s. But this lot, especially Red Buttons as Sailor, is more sympathetic than most. And it's hard not to like the sassily vulnerable Gloria with the boyishly innocent Robert. We begin to see a relationship develop there, and elsewhere... but the contest is so depleting of all precious bodily fluids, not to mention mental acuity, the growth of any deep and good human connection is constantly staving off stark madness.

The movie does an excellent job of conveying the loss of awareness attending such levels of exhaustion. [Reminds me of a time back in my 30s, when I'm up in Glacier National Park, hiking remote trails with my buddies. Our water got low, and we were all beginning to cave physically... but I wasn't in as good shape as they were. Anyway, it was a learning experience: simple rationality and benevolence take a beating when your body nears its limits. And my limits weren't very high.]

There's a great scene between Gloria and the former partner of Alice: they're both talking pretty much at the same time of totally different meaningful times in their lives. He's conveying his plans for celebrity, working with Alice to be noticed by someone in the movie business; Gloria is telling a totally sorry story about a pet she once dealt with as a child, that truly amounts to an omen of what she will become. It's a classic point/counterpoint with neither listening to the other's true confession.

They Shoot Horses is one of those movies, because of the ending, one can only discuss to a certain level as a critic to avoid giving anything away. And that's unfortunate. But we can discuss whether the movie is an example of naturalism or does it include any sort of heroic struggle we can identify with in the manner of romanticism. Well, truly we may state that in the midst of the almost documentary quality of the work, glimpses of courage and inner strength emerge. Much as some of the more sympathetic spectators (from what must be some smaller coastal town) of the community, we want to see our favorites acquit themselves well... even win the substantial prize.

Finally, the danceathon does feature music and entertainment, a swing band, concessions, a circus atmosphere. For audiences in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the film provides a unique picture of a rare cultural oddity in living color. I recall thinking back then when the movie came out, "You've got to be kidding. People would dance until they dropped as entertainment? No way." It always just seemed people would figure some other way to keep themselves busy or hopeful or productive in the middle of a Depression.

But who knows, if present economic trends continue, perhaps endurance events like these will make a comeback. Not for me. I'll be out digging for roots and berries.

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Shoot Horses | Dance Marathons | Depression Contests | Jane Fonda | Pollack

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