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**'How Come Everybody Down Here Has Three Names?':
Martin Ritt's Southern Films**

MICHAEL ADAMS

In recent years no major director has made as many films with Southern settings as has Martin Ritt. A New York Jew born in 1914 who briefly attended Elon College in North Carolina in the 1930s, Ritt began his acting career in the late thirties and directed plays while in the army during World War II. He acted in and directed plays and television programs (he was blacklisted from television in 1951) for several years before directing the first of his twenty-two films, *Edge of the City*, in 1957. Nearly a third of these films have been set in the South: *The Long, Hot Summer* (1958), *The Sound and the Fury* (1959), *Sounder* (1972), *Conrack* (1974), *Casey's Shadow* (1978), *Norma Rae* (1979), and *Back Roads*, to be released in 1981.¹ This group of films exemplifies the way the South has been treated by Hollywood over the past twenty-five years, revealing a mixture of suspicion and affection, amusement and outrage. Ritt's attitudes toward the South have changed surprisingly little over the years. He seems genuinely fond of the region and the character of its people but is too often condescending. Among the most frequent themes in these films are the relationships among family members, the effects of outsiders on close-knit communities, the isolation of the community, family, or individual, and the place of blacks in the South.

The Long, Hot Summer, like all but one of Ritt's Southern films, was made on location, this time in and around Clinton, Louisiana. Ritt said at this time, "I prefer to do as much of my pictures as I can on location. The sense of atmosphere, the feeling of contact with the real thing, helps the actors in their roles—and helps me too."² Loosely based on William Faulkner's *The Hamlet* and "Barn Burning," *The Long, Hot Summer* was written by Irving Ravetch and Harriet Frank, Jr. This

husband-wife screenwriting team from New York, who had written mostly B-Westerns before beginning a longtime collaboration with Ritt, also wrote the scripts for *The Sound and the Fury*, *Hud*, *Conrack*, and *Norma Rae*.³ *The Long, Hot Summer* bears little resemblance to its sources with many of the characters' names changed and their personalities drastically altered. Faulkner's slimy toad of a villain Flem Snopes becomes the blue-eyed, redneck prince Ben Quick, and all conflicts are hastily resolved in an epitome of the contrived Hollywood ending. According to Bruce Kawin, the filmmakers "deliberately reversed the value structure" of *The Hamlet*, "turning Faulkner's anti-capitalist black comedy into a Horatio Alger bedtime story. . . . *The Long, Hot Summer* is just the kind of success story *The Hamlet* parodies."⁴ With a very heavy Orson Welles as Will Varner, wanting more than anything heirs to inherit his kingdom, it is closer to *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* than to Faulkner. According to the Ravetches, they chose to emphasize the "glimpses of robust health and zest for life" they found in *The Hamlet*.⁵

The lust-under-the-magnolias clichés aside, *The Long, Hot Summer*, which is Ritt's most entertaining movie because of its excesses, introduces many of the elements the director is to elaborate in later



Orson Welles and Paul Newman provide a glimpse of "robust health and zest for life" in *The Long Hot Summer*.

films. One is the outsider who appears out of nowhere to affect the lives of all those around him, a motif which implies that the South is susceptible to change when given a little push. Ben Quick arrives penniless in Frenchman's Bend and soon progresses from sharecropper to general-store clerk to heir apparent to the town's most powerful citizen while dispersing the malaise which has settled over the entire Varner clan, especially the icy facade Miss Clara has built to protect herself from life. She secretly longs, however, for the touch of a real man in dirty work clothes. A second motif is the fluctuating relationships between family members. Clara and her brother Jody hate their father at various times but finally respect him grudgingly; the family threatened with disruption becomes healthy and whole as it does in varying degrees in *The Sound and the Fury*, *Sounder*, *Casey's Shadow*, and *Norma Rae*. This film presents the first of many unconventional family relationships which are present in Ritt's Southern films but absent from most of his non-Southern films, the Italian-Americans in *The Black Orchid* and *The Brotherhood* being notable exceptions. This unconventionality is epitomized in *The Long, Hot Summer* by Clara's sharp-tongued exchanges with her father, exchanges which profess her hate but imply her love, and by Jody's locking Will in a barn and setting it on fire only to rescue and embrace him. A final element is the isolation of the Southern community. Frenchman's Bend seems miles from any other town, totally cut off from the rest of the world and in a world of its—and Will Varner's—own creation. The characters have little awareness of anything beyond Frenchman's Bend, and nothing seems to happen there except what involves the protagonists. The life in Ritt's rural South is usually limited by its provinciality.

While doing pre-production work for *The Sound and the Fury*, Ritt said, "We've now made it a conventional story but preserved the basic quality."⁶ Unfortunately, Ritt, the Ravetches, and producer Wald did not apparently understand what this "basic quality" is, for their adaptation of Faulkner's masterpiece is one of the most ineffective movies based on a serious literary work.⁷ The novel is about time, responsibility, suicide, madness, incest, greed, and the disintegration of a family and a culture. The film is only about the problems the second Quentin Compson has while growing up. The novel's villain becomes the

movie's hero as Jason Compson tries to raise his stepniece Quentin as well as he can while keeping her away from the influence of Caddy, the sluttish mother who abandoned her. As played by Margaret Leighton, Caddy seems more like Blanche DuBois than Faulkner's creation; Ritt and the Ravetches once again try to turn Yoknapatawpha, Mississippi, into Williams, Tennessee. The most drastic changes are to eliminate the first Quentin Compson's story completely while turning this vivid symbol of alienation into dull, alcoholic Uncle Howard and to make Jason a Compson by adoption, the son of Mr. Compson's Cajun second wife. The latter change is necessary to explain the casting of the exotic Yul Brynner and the romantic involvement of Jason and his stepniece at the end of the movie. The film is not bad because of these changes but, as Bruce Kawin points out, because the changes are not "dramatically interesting."⁸ The film also lacks any of the humor and vulgar vitality of *The Long, Hot Summer*; it just lies there on the screen, hardening into a monument to ineptitude.

Ritt seems handicapped not only by the changes and the casting, but by the lack of the inspiration he claims to need from shooting on location. Filming on a Hollywood backlot to avoid weather problems which hampered the making of *The Long, Hot Summer*, Ritt made *The Sound and the Fury* into the dullest, most plodding of his movies. Even evidence of his specialty, directing actors, is missing; only Jack Warden as Benjy seems to have any conviction about what he is doing.⁹

As for Ritt's usual motifs, we have unusual family relationships with an adopted stepson ruling over his aging mother, drunken stepbrother, retarded stepbrother, wandering stepsister, and rebellious stepniece, and finally becoming both father, mother, and, apparently, husband to the latter. Jason's exact connection to each of these characters is so imprecise it can easily be misunderstood. Jason is also a modified version of Ritt's outsider in charge of straightening things out. Another outsider, carnival roustabout Charles Busch, unintentionally helps bring matters to their conclusion by trying to run away with Quentin. The sense of the town's isolation helps to underscore Jason's sense of responsibility. One final element of note is Ethel Waters' performance as Dilsey, the loyal retainer. This characterization foreshadows the moralizing of *Hud's* Homer Bannon and the

too-good-to-be-true blacks of *Sounder*. The filmmakers may be trying to invest her with some dignity, but she comes off as a clichéd all-wise mammy.

Faulkner praises Dilsey of *The Sound and the Fury* and blacks like her for their endurance, and Ritt's *Sounder* is a paean to the dignity, loyalty, love, and patience of poor Southern Negroes. Partially because it is a quiet, charming, yet moving film released at a time when most screen depictions of blacks emphasized sex and violence, *Sounder* received the highest critical praise of any of Ritt's films. Pauline Kael called it "the first movie about black experiences in America which can stir people of all colors," and Vincent Canby, who did not like the film, said it "has been endorsed by everybody with the exception of God, but God doesn't have an outlet."¹⁰ Because of the crossover appeal and the critics' enthusiasm, *Sounder* has been the most financially successful Ritt film.¹¹ The praise for *Sounder* was not, however, as universal as Canby claimed. Many blacks and white liberals saw it as patronizing and dishonest. Because of the characters' passive acceptance of injustice, some critics charged that Ritt was presenting a racial stereotype. Edward Mapp writes, "Negative attitudes about 'happy darkies' are reinforced each time Rebecca [the mother of the film's family] meets misfortune with a healthy display of dentures. . . . Neither by rage nor rebellion possessed, she is a good nigger, patient and acquiescent. It is unlikely that white movie audiences, unfamiliar with the code of living forced upon blacks in the South during the 1930s, will recognize the historical context of this story. They are more likely to see Rebecca as a black woman who knows her place."¹²

A more accurate appraisal of *Sounder* lies somewhere between the extreme responses the film elicited. Ritt had treated racial material earlier in *Edge of the City*, *Paris Blues*, *Hombre*, and *The Great White Hope*. With *Sounder* his liberal views about racial matters merge with his material to produce his most effective statement about race and about the family. *Sounder* is his most successfully realized film, approaching sentimentality at times but never going too far in its sweetness or didacticism.

Based on William H. Armstrong's Newberry Medal-winning 1969 novella, *Sounder* is one Ritt adaptation which adds more to its source

than it takes away. Screenwriter Lonnie Elder III, the black playwright best known for *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men*, takes a fairly slight story about a boy's affection for his imprisoned father and for their hunting dog and changes it into a powerful tale about the bonds which hold a family of sharecroppers together during the hard times of the Depression in Louisiana. About the only arguable change Elder makes is the rather peaceful arrest of the father; Armstrong's version is violent. Because the movie was produced by Robert Radnitz, a maker of children's films, and financed by the Mattel toy company, it had to be tame enough to receive a "G" rating.

Sounder shows what life was like for a black family in the rural South during the 1930s: hoeing the fields, hunting for game, surviving as a unit, continuing to survive when the father is arrested for stealing meat, a theft justified by circumstances. *Sounder* is much subtler than the usual Ritt movie, depicting the family's hardships without melodrama. The love of the family members is also understated, coming across in the way they exchange glances and do things for each other. According to black film historian Donald Bogle, *Sounder* "picked up many of the things toyed with before [in American movies] and amalgamated them to create a rich and fully realized portrait of the black family in America."¹³

One would expect Ritt to emphasize the injustice depicted in the story since the family has to suffer the deprivation of the father just because he is trying to feed them. But Ritt and Elder are more interested in downplaying their moral indignation to portray the son's growth into maturity as he assumes the burden of being the man of the family while also maintaining his desire to be educated, and the mother's strength in helping the family survive. Ellen Holly has praised this character as "a role that at long last gives a certain kind of black woman her decent due," and Pauline Kael called her the "first great black heroine on the screen."¹⁴ The emotional depth of *Sounder* comes across in several scenes: the family's pride in the father's baseball pitching, the return of the father, limping from a prison accident (a scene patterned after a similar one in King Vidor's 1929 *Hallelujah*), and the father's urging the son to seek the world beyond their farm.

Ritt underscores the isolation of his characters at the beginning of

Sounder, but a sense of the outside world evolves as the son travels about trying to learn what prison camp his father is in. Ritt wants to show that the boy—and all black Southerners—is not limited by his immediate environment. These scenes and the rest were filmed in Louisiana's East Feliciana and St. Helena parishes, the same location as that of *The Long, Hot Summer*. They give an even better sense of place than Ritt usually does because of the variety of locales and the beauty of John Alonzo's cinematography. (He also photographed *Conrack*, *Casey's Shadow*, and *Norma Rae*.)

Conrack, again written by the Ravetches, is based on *The Water is Wide* (1972), white Southerner Pat Conroy's account of the months in 1969 he spent teaching black children on Daufuskie Island, South Carolina, near his home town of Beaufort. (The movie was filmed mostly on St. Simons Island, Georgia.) Because the island community is poor, black, completely insulated from the rest of the world, and primarily because no one seems to care about them, the students do not know anything, even the name of the ocean a few yards from their homes. Conroy, whose name is pronounced *Conrack* by the children, tries to overcome this backwardness through unconventional teaching methods, pouring a mass of unrelated facts into the children's minds, trying to make them care more about themselves and what will happen to them. In doing so he encounters the wrath of an ignorant black principal who wants him to be a strict disciplinarian (he tells her, "We're off the plantation, Mrs. Scott, and I'll be goddamned if you're going to turn me into an overseer") and a reactionary white superintendent ("I never in my heart accepted Appomattox") and loses his job, leaving the children, the film says, with no prospects for the future.

Conrack exemplifies some of Ritt's worst failures as a liberal filmmaker. He says that he wants the viewer to come away saying, " 'Ok, it's nice to feel that the human race is still several steps above the other species. And it's nice to feel that a man will commit himself for what he believes even if it seems likely he will suffer for it.' "¹⁵ But does Conroy suffer? Since he is not part of this community, has no permanent commitment to it, he can go back to his relatively comfortable white-middle-class world, write a book about his experience, sell it to the movies, and continue his career as a writer.¹⁶ The real-life

Conroy says, "If I'd stood on my head for them for ten years, basically there wasn't much that could have changed, except maybe for the next generation."¹⁷ But the movie implies otherwise in his accomplishment of so much to motivate the children in a few months.

Conrack is filled with contradictions and omissions. Conroy wants to combat the attitudes of the principal who calls the students "babies," yet he cradles a ten-year-old in his arms while playing a recording of Brahms' "Lullaby." He claims to have once been a racist who threw watermelons at blacks, but we get no indication of what has caused him to change. More seriously, Ritt shows nothing of what life is like for the islanders. Except for one young moonshiner and a pimp we never see anyone but the students and a few old people. Where are the children's parents, brothers, and sisters? What do the islanders do to support themselves? How big is the island? Such questions bother the viewer because the omission of details is so glaring. Conroy is admirable for teaching his students about Picasso and Jackie Robinson; but he does not seem at all interested in *their* lives, in the possibility of anything of interest *on* the island. Ritt and the Ravetches apparently love their protagonist so much that they lose sight of everything else. We admire the strength of their feelings and share them to some extent, but that is not enough to make the film successful.

The outsider motif is important in *Conrack*, but the family is less evident than in Ritt's other Southern films although Conroy and his students develop into a family of sorts with their seeing him as a benevolent older brother. Isolation, however, receives its biggest emphasis here. Not only do the children live on an island, but they have never been off it because of the islanders' ignorant fear of the water. (None of the students can swim until Conroy throws them into the ocean.) When he takes them to Beaufort for Halloween, their faces on the boat display pure terror. Ritt makes an interesting observation here about change in the South, noting that opposition to it does not result just from conservatism, racism, or greed, but from ignorance, fear, and innocence.

Casey's Shadow, Ritt's next Southern film, differs greatly from *Conrack* for he uses the South only as the background for its first half. The main emphasis is on quarter-horse racing in southwestern Louisiana

and Ruidoso, New Mexico, and on the relationship between block horse trainer Lloyd Bourdelle and his three sons. The film, with a script by Carol Sobieski based on John McPhee's *New Yorker* article "Ruidoso" (29 April 1974), has only a few Southern details, such as Bourdelle's exchanging Cajun French pleasantries in a cafe. The isolation motif is less important than usual. The Bourdelles live on a solitary, run-down ranch, but their isolation is not important.

Ritt does, however, present another unusual family relationship. Bourdelle's wife has run away years earlier, leaving him to raise his sons, now around ten, eighteen, and twenty-five. Because of Bourdelle's gruff manner and lack of success, his sons view him with a mixture of affection and exasperation. Like good Southern sons, they obey him but not without arguing first. The family threatens to be split over Casey's Shadow, a potentially great race horse. Bourdelle's lack of money has not bothered him until this horse offers him a chance finally to become someone. He is even willing to risk losing his sons' regard by deciding to race the horse, although it has an injury, in the All-American Futurity, the world's richest race, at Ruidoso Downs. The horse wins but is severely injured and is to be destroyed. The sons have fought Bourdelle about the horse's treatment, reversing the conflict Ritt depicted in *Hud* by having the young make moral judgments about the old. When the horse is unexpectedly saved, all is well again, and the family has a new sense of closeness. Ritt shows some maturity by accepting that his protagonist is imperfect; the man who made *Hud* would not have been so forgiving of Bourdelle's selfishness. *Casey's Shadow* also displays some awareness about how the South has changed for the better; the fact that the horse's owner is black is presented matter-of-factly.

The black-white relations in *Norma Rae* are also natural and friendly—about the only indication that this is the New South. Otherwise, the film, set in 1978, could be taking place in 1958 or even 1938. The subject matter, the difficulty of starting a labor union in a textile mill, seems anachronistic but accurately reflects management-employee relationships that still exist in some areas of the South. *Norma Rae* is based on a *New York Times Magazine* article by Henry P. Leifermann about the inability of workers to start a union at a J. P. Stevens mill in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina, focusing on one

worker, Crystal Lee Jordan, the model for Ritt's heroine.¹⁸ (The film, set in a place called Henleyville, was made in Opelika, Alabama.) The effort to start a union, however, is not what most concerns Ritt and the Ravetches. (For some reason, we never see the owners or executives who run the mill. The film implies that the foremen are in charge.) They are interested in presenting a lovable portrait of their protagonist.

Norma Rae is uneducated and promiscuous yet honest, hardworking, inquisitive, sensitive, loving, and funny. Like the blacks in *Sounder*, she is almost too good. We are supposed to love her for the strength of her character, her determination to see that right is done, her lack of pretentiousness, and her take-me-as-I-am-or-to-hell-with-you brand of individualism. Another sign of Ritt's maturity is that the promiscuity he so hated in *Hud* is tolerated in *Norma Rae*. The most revolutionary aspect of the film is the heroine's relationship with Reuben Marshasky, the New York Jew who comes to Henleyville to organize the union. Norma Rae and Reuben help, respect, and learn from each other without the slightest hint of potential romance, a remarkably contemporary treatment of a male-female friendship.



Sally Field in her Academy-award winning performance as a defiant *Norma Rae*.

Reuben, like Conroy, is another variation on Ritt's great white liberal who hits town to correct all its problems before riding off into the sunset in his rented car. The director's idealism allows his outsider to succeed here even though the real-life model did not.

The isolation of Henleyville is not emphasized, though it is apparently miles from anywhere and its citizens inbred, giving no thought to moving elsewhere for higher pay or better working conditions. (Their complacency makes their pro-union vote less credible.) Ritt builds such a sense of a dead-end hick town that we are shocked when Norma Rae shows up with a Dylan Thomas paperback she has just purchased; obviously it did not come from Woolworth's. *Norma Rae's* family relationships are underdeveloped. Norma Rae has only one scene of any consequence with her children (though they are silent), her husband virtually disappears after they are married, and her parents hardly talk to each other. The father's overprotective, you're-still-my-little-girl, almost incestuous attitude toward the thirtyish Norma Rae is, however, quite believable.

What is most distressing about *Norma Rae* is that after all these years Ritt (and the Ravetches) is still occasionally inaccurate about and condescending toward the South. Many little details are irritatingly false. Norma Rae says "five-and-dime" when most Southerners like her would probably say "ten-cent store," and a millworker (Ritt in a one-word cameo) hurls the decidedly non-Southern epithet "Fink." Reuben asks, "How come everybody down here has three names?" because most of the characters are called by such names as Jimmy Jerome or Billy Joe. But one is more likely to find this habit of naming in the Southwest than in the deep South. One of the most embarrassingly inept scenes in movie history occurs when Norma Rae and Reuben are out recruiting support for the union and encounter six old men (one a token black) loafing on a grocery-store porch, and the director, in the apparent interest of "action," has all six whittling. Rarely has patronizing Hollywood clubbed the South with such a clumsy cliché.

Ritt says, "I like the South. The essence of drama is change, and the section of the country that is most in flux appears to me to be the South; therefore, I go there to make films."¹⁹ Yet he deals with this flux only superficially in his films, being attracted again and again to the re-

gion's backwardness. He does have something to say about isolation, prejudice, injustice, greed, and the forces which disrupt and the love which holds together the family. This would be enough if he was not so often self-congratulatory about his love for the "little people." Ritt claims to be a professional and a craftsman, not an artist,²⁰ and perhaps what is wrong with these films is that he does not give us the insights about the South that an artist would.

NOTES

¹*Back Roads*, about the relationship between a prostitute and an ex-boxer, was filmed from Gary DeVore's script in the Mobile area in May and June, 1980. The film was released in March 1981 and had a mixed reception. Andrew Sarris wrote in *The Village Voice*: "Sally Field and Tommy Lee Jones are about as ideally cast as knockabout-lovers-on-the-run in *Back Roads* as one could wish. . . . The only problem they have is that director Martin Ritt and scenarist Gary DeVore lack the breathtaking talent it would take to bring off this *It Happened One Night* of the lower depths" (11-17 March 1981, p. 47).

²Quoted by Arthur Knight, "Filming Faulknerland," *Saturday Review*, 7 Dec. 1957, p. 53.

³The Ravetches wrote one of Ritt's non-Southern films, *Hombre*, and also adapted Faulkner's *The Reivers* (1969), directed by Mark Rydell.

⁴*Faulkner and Film* (New York: Ungar, 1977), p. 53.

⁵Irving Ravetch and Harriet Frank, Jr., "On Putting Faulkner on the Screen," unpublished memo quoted in its entirety in George Sidney, "Faulkner in Hollywood: A Study of His Career as a Scenarist," Diss. Univ. of New Mexico 1959, p. 244.

⁶Quoted by Howard Thompson, "Ritt for the Record on Direction," *New York Times*, 1 June 1958, Sec. 2, p. 5.

⁷Jerry Wald tries to justify the changes in "From Faulkner to Film," *Saturday Review*, 7 March 1959, pp. 16, 47.

⁸*Faulkner and Film*, p. 23.

⁹Ten performers in Ritt films have been nominated for Oscars with three winning the awards: Patricia Neal and Melvyn Douglas for *Hud*, Sally Field for *Norma Rae*. These and other actors have won other awards for Ritt films.

¹⁰*Reeling* (New York: Warner, 1976), p. 21; "All But 'Super Fly' Fall Down," *New York Times*, 15 Nov. 1972, Sec. 2, p. 1.

¹¹According to *Variety*, 9 Jan. 1980, pp. 24, 44-54, 74, Sounder's American and Canadian rentals totalled \$8,726,000, almost a million more than any other of his films.

¹²"Black Women in Films: A Mixed Bag of Tricks," in *Black Films and Film-Makers: A Comprehensive Anthology From Stereotype to Superhero*, ed. Lindsay Patterson (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1975), p. 199. Patterson's own "Sounder—A Hollywood Fantasy?" pp. 106-08, is a harsh attack on the historical accuracy of the film.

¹³*Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Viking, 1973), p. 240.

¹⁴"At Long Last, the Super Sound of 'Sounder,'" *New York Times*, 15 Oct. 1972, Sec. 2, p. 15; *Reeling*, p. 24.

¹⁵Quoted by Betty Jeffries Demby, "The Making of *Conrack*: An Interview with Martin Ritt," *Filmmakers Newsletter*, April 1974, p. 30.

¹⁶Conroy used the proceeds of his book to set aside \$1,000 for each of his students when they reached eighteen (Demby, p. 27).

¹⁷Quoted by Kael, *Reeling*, p. 401.

¹⁸"The Umions Are Coming," *New York Times Magazine*, 5 Aug. 1973, pp. 10-11, 25-26.

¹⁹Quoted by Donald Chase, "Martin Ritt and the Making of *Norma Rae*," *Millimeter*, 7 (June 1979), 45.

²⁰Demby, p. 31.