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Petulia

(Warner Home Video, 6.20.2006)

There was considerable surprise in 1979 when the Canadian film magazine *Take One* conducted a poll of twenty prominent critics, including Andrew Sarris and Francois Truffaut, to select the best American and European films released in the United States between January 1, 1968, and December 31, 1978. Not surprisingly, *The Godfather* and *The Godfather: Part II*, considered one film, was number one on the American list, followed by *Nashville*. Number three, however, was Richard Lester's *Petulia*, ahead of *Annie Hall*, *Mean Streets*, and *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

This ranking was unexpected because while *Petulia* received respectable reviews when it was released in 1968 it did not get the acclaim of Coppola's epic and other titles on the list. *Petulia* did only moderate business and probably wasn't even seen outside larger cities and college towns. Audiences may have resisted because *Petulia* was advertised as a comedy but has little humor. This neglect combined with a quality that must have lurked in the minds of those polled may account for its high ranking.

Archie Bollen (George C. Scott) is a San Francisco doctor going through a divorce. An eccentric young woman, Petulia Danner (Julie Christie) takes a fancy to him, and he can't get rid of her. She even shows up at his apartment with a tuba, the sort of behavior that defines lovable wackiness in the American films of this period. Archie resists Petulia's significant charms because she is married to David (Richard Chamberlain), a spoiled rich jerk, and because he has a soon-to-be-ex (Shirley Knight), two sons, and a girlfriend (Pippa Scott) to worry about. Yet he slowly falls in love with her.

Petulia does not avoid all the clichés of the square-older-man-hip-younger-woman genre, but screenwriter Lawrence B. Marcus tries to make matters subtle by never spelling out Archie's dilemma as crazy-mixed-up middle-aged man. Compare this character to Jack Lemmon's five years later in the similar but truly dreadful *Save the Tiger* to see the difference.

Petulia is a criticism of the mores of middle-class American society. It opens with stuffy rich people attending a charity ball. Lester contrasts their uptightness with the vitality of the ball's unlikely band, Big Brother and the Holding Company. There is a priceless shot of an overly made-up woman staring in puzzled disgust behind a howling Janis Joplin. A shot of an impersonal housing development is profoundly depressing. Hovering in the background of a scene between Archie and Petulia are two towering images of Bob Dylan. New gods are needed to save this plastic world.

Just as Lester's earlier films, especially *A Hard Day's Night*, still his masterpiece, are clearly influenced by the style and narrative freedom of the French New

Wave, *Petulia* is also indebted to these films, especially Truffaut's *Jules and Jim*. At the time *Petulia* was seen as trendy because of Lester's use not only of flashbacks but flashforwards, as well as Nicolas Roeg's flashy cinematography. (We learn in an extra that Roeg spit on the lens to achieve one effect.) Even in 1968, it seemed that Lester was trying a bit too hard, and all this period style dates the film considerably.

More impressive is the throwaway dialogue of minor characters wandering in and out of scenes. Lester prefigures what Robert Altman would do with sound two years later in *MASH*. (He also uses two actors who would appear in that film: Rene Auberjonois and Roger Bowen.) Some Lestersque humor comes from carloads of nuns peeling rubber in sports cars.

Chamberlain does the best work of his career as the smug, abusive husband. Scott gives his most rounded performance. The way he charges up a hillside rather than wait for an elevator tells us all we need to know about Archie's frustrations. From *Billy Liar* in 1963 to the underrated *Demon Seed* in 1977, Christie was the most luminous of movie stars. When *Petulia* tells David how beautiful he was when they met, Christie herself is breathtakingly gorgeous.

In "The Uncommon Making of *Petulia*," Chamberlain, producer Raymond Wagner, and editor Antony Gibbs share their memories of the production. Gibbs recalls suggesting the flashforwards to Lester. Christie and Lester are heard on the soundtrack of a period making-of, which features an annoying narrator trying too hard to explain how "uncommon" the film is.—Michael Adams