

ALEX IN WONDERLAND

DIRECTED BY ALEX MAZURSKY

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*“What a bizarre movie!” – Paul Mazursky*

Coppola. Scorsese. Lucas. Altman. Allen. Ashby. Malick. Bogdanovich. Cassavetes.

When the story of American filmmaking in the Seventies is told, Mazursky typically gets bumped to demigod status in the pantheon, an afterthought to his more celebrated contemporaries. Was it because he was a decade older than most of the New Hollywood crowd? Or because his peaceful private life wouldn't feed the tabloid machine? Because his films weren't always reducible to tidy loglines? Or because he made humane, inquisitive comedies about domestic life?

Whatever the reason, Mazursky got a raw deal. In less than ten years, he directed BOB & CAROL & TED & ALICE (1969), ALEX IN WONDERLAND (1970), BLUME IN LOVE (1973), HARRY & TONTO (1974), NEXT STOP, GREENWICH VILLAGE (1976), and AN UNMARRIED WOMAN (1978). Not a gangster opus or space opera in the mix – instead, movies defined by an ongoing interest, even enthrallment, with what it means to be a human, curious and confused.

Here's another theory why Mazursky – a five-time Oscar nominee – is too often skipped over: His Seventies pictures both reflected and challenged American culture in the moment they were being made, which by necessity time-stamped them. Four decades after that exceptional and diverse run of movies, they can seem dated to modern audiences. Funny, searching, never didactic, these films explored monogamy, divorce, aging, race, women's lib, and the eternal struggle to make a soulful, authentic statement as an artist. (NEXT STOP, GREENWICH VILLAGE was a period piece, inspired by Mazursky's own experiences as a budding boho in the Fifties, but its treatments of abortion, suicide, and sexuality were at the time progressive for a studio picture.) While these films are in many ways timeless, it's hard not to wince now at Alex's sincere but clumsy desire to dramatize “the black dilemma” in ALEX IN WONDERLAND, or BLUME IN LOVE's infamous rape scene (which was controversial even upon its release, at least with feminist viewers). But as tin-eared as some of these moments may play now, there's still something not just admirable but electrifying in how Mazursky retuned the

domestic comedy to catch counterculture vibrations. Time and again, he went out on a ledge in his films; it feels unsporting not to join him there.

The swinging BOB & CAROL & TED & ALICE, Mazursky's directorial debut (co-written with Larry Tucker), was a sensation, certainly due in part to the involvement of the former child star and "good girl" Natalie Wood in a story about a sexual taboo. After that early success, Mazursky struggled to find a suitable followup. He eventually channeled that frustration into the semi-autobiographical story of a first-time director, Alex Morrison (Donald Sutherland), creatively adrift after his own much-heralded debut. Tucker again shared writing credit, but it would be the duo's last partnership; Mazursky blamed the break on Tucker going into psychoanalysis.

ALEX IN WONDERLAND is not easily contained. It's an imaginative sketching of the creative process, shaded in with fantasy sequences inspired by Fellini, Bergman, and the French New Wavers; a snapshot of Los Angeles in uneasy transition between the Golden Age studio system and the coming New Hollywood (which occasions a very funny supporting turn by Mazursky as a glib producer); and a stirring look at family life. When Mazursky asked his hero Fellini, who cameos in the film and would become a great friend, what he thought of the picture, Fellini replied that he loved the family scenes, "but the fantasies I could do without."

Fellini was right in championing the family element. It brings Mazursky's European-arthouse aspirations back down to earth and grounds the film beautifully with everyday tableaux of domestic life: Alex goofing off at bath time with his youngest daughter (Glenna Sargent); lolling in bed on a Saturday morning with his eldest (played by Mazursky's daughter, Meg, who sadly died at age 52 from a brain tumor); and muddling through a thousand tiny marital negotiations with his practical, pragmatic wife, Beth (Ellen Burstyn). In these scenes, as throughout his whole career, Mazursky favors long master shots – the better to get to know the Morrison family, and even fall a little in love with them.

Audiences at the time weren't so taken with this messy, vibrant, self-searching film, and neither were many critics. (The New York Times' Vincent Canby called it "self-indulgent emptiness.") Ailing MGM took a fatal hit on it. (Mazursky: "ALEX was the last picture made at MGM when it was still MGM. We closed the place down.") Stung, the filmmaker packed up his family and moved them to Rome for a few years. What better place for a Fellini devotee and an American director branded "too European"?

The time away served him well. His next film, BLUME IN LOVE, which used Italy as a framing device, was warmly received, along with the rest of the films he put out that decade. Earlier this year, when it was announced that the Writers Guild West would bestow their annual Screen Laurel Award on Mazursky honoring his lifetime achievement, guild vice-president Howard A. Rodman rightly counted him "among our greatest living screenwriters" and cited that terrific run of Seventies movies. Well, save one: Still no love for ALEX IN WONDERLAND.

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