

## GOLDCREST'S REVOLUTION

Graham McCann

In 1981, Colin Welland and Hugh Hudson held aloft the Oscar for *Chariots of Fire*. The future of British film looked good. In early 1985, Goldcrest were involved in significant film-making programmes. Small production companies were developing local talent; Channel 4's low-budget film programme was finally resulting in some serious pieces of cinema; and a fair mix of Oscar nominations and festival accolades was collected.

Then suddenly last summer, the sirens started sounding. Goldcrest's manage-

ment realised in May 1985 that the company was going broke. Its lack of funds was caused by an over-ambitious production programme which severely strained the company's resources.

Hugh Hudson's *Revolution* absorbed so much of Goldcrest's resources that its reception was awaited with an anxiety bordering on desperation. The critics were quick to call the film a catastrophe, a commercial calamity that left the British film industry close to collapse. It was during James Lee's brief tenure as chief

executive of Goldcrest that *Revolution* was commissioned and made. His successor, Jake Eberts, has the unenviable task of selling it. There are considerable questions to be answered: *Revolution's* budget could have paid for *Angel*, *Wetherby*, and *Letter to Brezhnev*.

*Revolution* stars Al Pacino as New York river trader Tom Dobb, a man drawn reluctantly into the war through his son, who has been forced into the army as a drummer boy and captured by the English. He is helped by the fiercely patriotic aristocrat Daisy McConnahay (Nastassia Kinski), and hounded by a thoroughly unpleasant Sergeant Major Peasy (Donald Sutherland) from the British Army. The supporting cast includes Joan Plowright and Steven Berkoff, with Eurhythmics sin-



Revolutionaries: Al Pacino (below) and Nastassia Kinski look on while the American army lays siege to the British garrison at Yorktown



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ger Annie Lennox making a creditable film debut as a firebrand. The story represents an uneasy union of two recent themes in American cinema: the father-son relationship of *Kramer versus Kramer*, and the radicalism/romance of *Reds*.

Hugh Hudson's film taps one of the richest veins in American folklore: the individual against the majority, against conformity, against containment. Tom Dobb is an appreciation of the 'common man', eventually inspired by independence as the rich merchant daughter pushes him towards the realisation that he is acting out a moment of history: down these muddy streets a man must go. Hudson chose Pacino for his ability to portray the plain but passionate Dobb: 'we didn't want an actor who would stand out in the crowd', explains Hudson, 'but rather someone who blended into the background, just another poor recruit caught up in the war. Al is the only superstar who could be accepted as one of the people.'

As a narrative the film struggles to do credit to its original sources. The American War of Independence lasted for eight years. Thus, the action in *Revolution* spans a considerable period - from the opening credits in which a mob topples a New York statue of George III in 1776, to the end of the war in 1783 when Britain finally recognised America's independence. In between came all the key battles: Brooklyn Heights, Valley Forge, and Yorktown. As the action builds, we see the first tentative steps of the Rocky-Rambo-Reagan man, a deceptively 'earnest' individual.

*Revolution's* budget escalated from \$15m to \$22m. Hudson attributes the rise in cost to poor weather and subsequent shooting delays, and the fact that filming was halted when Pacino fell ill: 'This is a major international film, to be shown all around the world. Compared with almost any Spielberg picture the price is modest, yet he isn't attacked for over-spending'. After making an expensive epic which has little to phone home about, Hudson's defiance is quite astonishingly arrogant. Whatever the reasons, the cost of *Revolution* has put in jeopardy the careers of many talented young British film-makers.

The script is flawed at every level, including that of coherent narrative. The three key characters whose paths cross and re-cross over the years - Dobb, Daisy and Peasy - remain mere cyphers. They signal-ly fail to engage our sympathy as indi-



Following the Soweto uprisings in 1976, many South African schoolchildren fled from police violence into neighbouring countries. The ANC responded by creating a complex of schools in Tanzania - the Solomon Mhlangu Freedom College - so that these children could continue their education. The college is part of a small town with over 2,000 people: it has to provide everything from food to medicines. *Mzimba - Behind the Lines of a Liberation Movement*, showing on Channel 4 on March 3 looks at the experiences of pupils and teachers at the college and examines the philosophy that inspires this project.

It is an interesting film not least because it shows another side of the ANC's work - one not normally seen on tv. Its weakness, however, is that it does not take on board any criticism of their kind of teaching, for there will inevitably be some shock reactions from those who think that the school is just another form of communist indoctrination.

Despite its unquestioning view of the school, the film implicitly raises a lot of questions about the nature of socialist education. But, more importantly, it provides a fascinating and unique insight into the school, making public its work and the need for international support for the venture to continue.

Sally Hibbin.

viduals or command our interest as emblematic figures. Pacino is muffled by mediocre lines; Kinski is obliged to be stereotypically 'female', flitting in and out of frame to no great effect; Donald Sutherland's performance is almost beneath criticism, shamelessly sporting a Yorkshire dialect previously heard on *Hovis* advertisements. The British are presented as a decadent, classbound coterie of powdered ponces, fops, pederasts and sadists.

The film works on the war without supplying any sense of the politics, the strategy, the geography, or the timescale of the conflict. The big, bloody, booming battle scenes punctuate the more intimate scenes like commercial breaks - intrusive without being illuminating. 'Get outta here, ya negro', shouts a white after the victory of Yorktown. 'We want our freedom too', the black shouts back, thus raising the racial issue for the first and final time. It is such unevenness that suggests poor planning or ill-conceived editing.

The film does look quite beautiful, with its muted and grainy advertising hues. Hudson can certainly compose a shot, but the camp quality of Cambridge in *Chariots* is alien to early America, where the dialogue is dwarfed by the images. Hudson

and lighting cameramaia Bernard Lutic adopt a documentary device, taking the camera, hand-held, into the thick of the battle. The effect is to eavesdrop on history, but the effect does not match that in Wajda's *Danton* or Beatty's *Reds*.

18th century America is admirably recreated in England. Indeed, any filmmaker who manages to make King's Lynn appear as a hotbed of revolutionary fervour is not without prodigious talents. Yet the technical proficiency is squandered: *Revolution* rolls along, struggling to find a plot.

In order to salvage its standing, Goldcrest has been courting the heads of the major US studios. Heads have already rolled at Goldcrest, and Jake Eberts is back with his 'small is beautiful' philosophy. Three films are in the can, of which *Revolution* is the first. Goldcrest shared production costs with Warner Brothers and the Norwegian company, Viking. Half of their money has already been recouped in pre-sales: theatrical rights, television and video sales. What will determine Goldcrest's immediate future is the commercial fate of the other two films in which it has a stake: Roland Joffe's *The Mission* and Julien Temple's *Absolute Beginners*.