



**BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**

# **Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice**

While monogamy remains the secular religion, Mazursky's ambling satire, exploring a bourgeois 60s LA foursome both electrified and terrified by the possibilities of sexual freedom, retains a curious relevance. Triggered by his own brush with self-actualisation counter-culture at Esalen in California, Mazursky saw his first feature (he'd been shunted aside from the 1968 hippie rom-com *I Love You, Alice B. Toklas!*) as a 'comedy of manners played with as much reality as possible'. Delivering its deliciously awkward marital exchanges in long scenes whose moods shift and tilt Cassavetes-style, it's a compassionate relationship comedy, sidestepping the cynicism of later, harsher sex-culture bulletins like *Carnal Knowledge* (1971) and *Shampoo* (1975).

Sympathetic both to the boundary-pushing Bob and Carol, and the curious-but-wary Ted and Alice, it also has an ambiguity that means it can read equally as a celebratory or cautionary tale. Salacious rather than misogynistic in tone, Mazursky and co-writer Larry Tucker's script ensures that Dyan Cannon's comic chops and Natalie Wood's wide-eyed self-discovery get generous amounts of screen-time. The key component, however, is still Elliott Gould's troubled-but-tempted Ted, whose snack-spraying confession of adultery and panicked pre-orgy bathroom primping mix fear and desire to hilarious effect.

**Kate Stables, *Sight & Sound*, March 2019**

## **A contemporary review**

Looking like a tempting offering to be either praised or damned as another highly original or desperately competitive slice of 'New Cinema', *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice* is more than usually interesting for its success in shifting ground in one of those surprising, but quite characteristic switches by which Hollywood not so much moves as lurches with the times. It would be cynical to treat the film as old wine in a new bottle, but it adroitly accommodates some well matured ingredients with fresh attitudes and an uncommon style in one of the most shrewdly calculated, original and effervescently funny American comedies for some time.

Opening on something of a deceptive note, the credit sequence begins with a series of swooping aerial shots as Bob and Carol travel through a peaceful range of Californian hills, accompanied by an equally sweeping rendition of the 'Hallelujah Chorus', before car and camera come to rest at one of those luxurious open plan, ranch-style houses, nestling firmly on its isolated shelf of real estate amidst all the natural splendour. But this suggestion of bracing satire, the gradual build-up to the comic apocalypse of suburbia at war with itself that took place in *Divorce American Style*, is quite misplaced here, as the next scene establishes.

Completely personal in its concerns and unsplenic in its methods, the film observes the group therapy session which follows with a non-committal lingering over faces and actions so that a quiet compassion eventually develops: characters are not dismissed with a briefly comic exposition of their problems, but are sufficiently established for neither sympathy nor humour to

quite override or shut out the other. For the rest of the film, the inconsequential is always kept in view, climaxes are seldom emphasised or even provided, and the characters are allowed to play through all the implications, the variety of moods and gestures in a scene until it fades away or is simply shrugged off like an out-worn skin.

The scene where 'nothing happens' is hardly new, but producer Frankovich and writer-director Paul Mazursky seem to have seized on it triumphantly as the natural expression for the tension-easing, inhibition-loosening message of their film. The direct antithesis of the hardworking, sharply manipulated situations, the pointed interchanges of emotion and the 'sex as a battleground' philosophy familiar from such commentators as Axelrod and Wilder, the film nevertheless accommodates very well those scenes more obviously in the mainstream of sophisticated sex comedy and usually played as long set pieces; for instance, Bob's harassed efforts to persuade the understandably reluctant Horst, immured in the bedroom, that he is not going to behave like any normal, red-blooded, cuckolded husband, or Ted's rather desperate physical and mental gyrations trying to accommodate both consideration for his wife, who is not 'in the mood' after hearing the story of Bob's infidelity, and his own eager passion (Ted is another inheritance from more conventional comedies – but Elliott Gould is perfect as this droll comedian of the foursome, the one who, before the climactic orgy, inevitably detours through the bathroom to brush his teeth and use the breath sweetener).

But in spirit the film is plainly different from the more familiar, more neurotic views of American mores; the characters, for instance, are more obviously in harmony with their times and their environment than, say, Anne Jackson in Axelrod's *The Secret Life of an American Wife*, yearning in her Connecticut-look kitchen for the more traditional values of college days and reading Proust, all eight volumes, in French. Bob and Carol obviously experience no such hang-ups about their equally plush surroundings; Bob himself is a documentary filmmaker (as played by Robert Culp, in dark glasses and with greying mane, looking like nothing so much as an ageing Peter Fonda), at one point shouting to Horst: 'There isn't going to be any hitting. We're a non-violent household. We don't even allow war toys in the house.'

So the film may even represent something of a capitulation in Hollywood's derisory attitude to the hippie movement, and such tenets of 'flower power' as the achievement of inner serenity through pot, free love, non-violence, etc. A change based perhaps on the simple conclusion that the wish to dissolve inner tensions and live at peace with oneself and the world is a fairly common hope, as proved by the actual popularity of those courses in 'confrontation psychology' – which seems to be group therapy commando-fashion, a sudden sharp onslaught on the members' inhibitions and preconceptions in the belief that it can stimulate a more spontaneous, responsive outlook.

**Richard Combs, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, January 1970**

**BOB & CAROL & TED & ALICE**

*Director:* Paul Mazursky  
©: Columbia Pictures Corporation  
*Production Companies:* Frankovich Productions, Coriander Productions  
*Executive Producer:* M.J. Frankovich  
*Producer:* Larry Tucker  
*Executive Production Manager:* William O’Sullivan  
*Assistant Director:* Anthony Ray  
*Screenplay:* Paul Mazursky, Larry Tucker  
*Director of Photography:* Charles Lang  
*Editor:* Stuart H. Pappé  
*Art Director:* Pato Guzmán  
*Set Decorator:* Frank Tuttle  
*Prop Master:* Max Frankel  
*Costume Designer:* Moss Mabry  
*Make-up Supervisor:* Ben Lane  
*Hairstyles:* Virginia Jones  
*Music:* Quincy Jones  
*Choreography:* Miriam Nelson  
*Sound Supervisor:* Charles J. Rice  
*Sound:* Dean Thomas, Arthur Piantadosi

**Cast**

Natalie Wood *(Carol Sanders)*  
Robert Culp *(Bob Sanders)*  
Elliott Gould *(Ted Henderson)*  
Dyan Cannon *(Alice Henderson)*  
Horst Ebersberg *(Horst)*  
Lee Bergere *(Emilio)*  
Donald F. Muhich *(psychiatrist)*  
Noble Lee Holderread Jr. *(Sean)*  
K.T. Stevens *(Phyllis)*  
Celeste Yarnall *(Susan)*  
Lynn Borden *(Cutter)*  
Linda Burton *(stewardess)*  
Greg Mullavey *(group leader)*  
André Philippe *(Oscar)*  
Diane Berghoff *(Myrna)*  
John Halloran *(Conrad)*  
Susan Merin *(Toby)*  
Jeffrey Walker *(Roger)*  
Vicki Thal *(Jane)*  
Joyce Easton *(Wendy)*  
Howard Dayton *(Howard)*  
Alida Ihle *(Alida)*  
John Brent *(Dave)*  
Garry Goodrow *(Bert)*  
Carol O’Leary *(Sue)*  
Constance Egan *(Norma)*

USA 1969©  
101 mins

**BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**

**Thelma and Louise**  
Sun 1 Aug 18:00; Sat 14 Aug 20:35; Sat 28 Aug 20:20  
**Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice**  
Mon 2 Aug 20:40; Fri 13 Aug 20:45; Wed 18 Aug 17:50 (+ pre-recorded intro by Julie Lobalzo Wright, University of Warwick); Mon 23 Aug 14:30  
**Bright Star**  
Tue 3 Aug 20:30; Fri 27 Aug 17:50; Mon 30 Aug 18:10  
**Boyz N the Hood**  
Wed 4 Aug 17:45 (+ pre-recorded intro by film critic Leila Latif);  
Mon 9 Aug 20:50  
**Les Demoiselles de Rochefort (The Young Ladies of Rochefort)**  
Thu 5 Aug 17:50; Thu 26 Aug 17:40  
**The Big Lebowski**  
Fri 6 Aug 20:45; Mon 16 Aug 20:50; Wed 25 Aug 14:15

**Only Angels Have Wings**  
Sat 7 Aug 12:00; Tue 24 Aug 14:15; Tue 31 Aug 20:30  
**A Farewell to Arms**  
Sun 8 Aug 12:20; Fri 20 Aug 14:30; Wed 25 Aug 18:00  
(+ pre-recorded intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-large)  
**Matewan**  
Tue 10 Aug 14:15; Sun 15 Aug 18:20; Sat 21 Aug 12:20  
**Cutter’s Way**  
Wed 11 Aug 17:50 (+ pre-recorded intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-large); Tue 17 Aug 14:30; Fri 20 Aug 20:50; Fri 27 Aug 20:50  
**The New World**  
Thu 12 Aug 14:30; Sun 22 Aug 12:00  
**Big Wednesday**  
Thu 19 Aug 17:50; Sun 29 Aug 18:10

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