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CAST AND CREW

CAST

Natalie Wood Carol Sanders Robert Culp Bob Sanders Elliott Gould Ted Henderson Dyan Cannon Alice Henderson

CREW

Directed by Paul Mazursky
Written by Paul Mazursky & Larry Tucker
Produced by M.J. Frankovich & Larry Tucker
Cinematography by Charles Lang
Edited by Stuart H. Pappé
Music by Quincy Jones

BACK TO THE BEDROOM: REVISITING BOB & CAROL & TED & ALICE

by Michael Atkinson

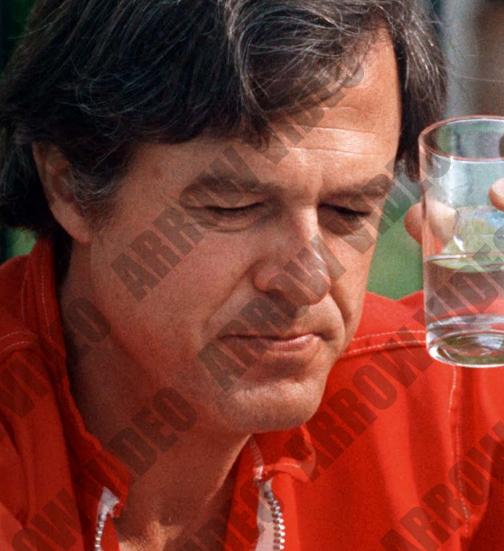
There are few more poignant signs of the progression of social mores than the fossil traces left behind by what we quickly came to call the Sexual Revolution. Could we, or our parents, ever have been this innocent? Could there have been an America so unjaundiced by infinite porn and Fappenings and Shades of Grey and president-to-porn-star hush payments that the public subject of sex, any sex outside of the dark marital bedroom, was still shocking? It was a pungent time – a decade maybe, mid-'60s to mid-'70s – when there was virtually no form of media (movies, TV news, fiction, magazines, sitcoms, talk shows, plays, ad infinitum) that wasn't fascinated with sex: who's doing it, who's not doing it enough, how to do it well, who to do it with, how to do it in new ways (or at least new to middle-class Americans), orgasm-achieving techniques, erectile longevity, G spots, and so on. It was a little like the dawning of puberty itself, but rampaging across the country, and through most of the industrialized world, with dryly written books on "sexology" becoming massive bestsellers. And like real teenagers, we were certainly thinking about, reading about, and discoursing on the subject a good deal more than actually engaging in it. For most of us, actually walking the sex talk would've required a sundering of conventional norms that very few over 23 were ready to risk during the Nixon administration. We're not "free" even yet.

As a culture we weren't learning about sex, of course (we did actually know about it, to a large degree), so much as learning about how much of a public culture we could stand sex to be, and as with anything else we've grown more jaded with each passing year. It's hard to be sanguine about that, in a world where even housewives know what PornHub is. The funny thing is, the same unease we may feel today with the tension between social order and the Wild West of free sexuality is hardly new - it's what fuels the older era's keynote movie, Paul Mazursky's Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice. Very much a movie of its moment, the preeminent Hollywood effort to explore and dissect the Zeitgeist of "how far should we go?", the film was a legend in its own time, its all-in title (becoming a kind of meme for wife-swapping) and four-to-a-bed publicity photos immediately bringing the Revolution right to the middle-class, middleaged moviegoers. This was the instant in which the whatever-feels-good sexual ethos of the "younger" generation was being tested out, not just as indulgence but as a moral position, by the kids' parents. And why not? Where did all of that repression and all those old-fashioned behavioural codes get us, anyway?

Mazursky's movie, his first, isn't quite what you'd expect from the hullabaloo. (It was, in any case, a buzz-churning hit, out-earning *True Grit* [1969], *Oliver!* [1968] and *Woodstock* [1970].) An ex-comic, Mazursky had been a busy bit actor for the previous decade and a half, after debuting in Stanley Kubrick's freshman exercise *Fear and Desire* (1953), and had written for TV (*The Danny Kaye Show* [1963-1967], the pilot for *The Monkees* [1966]), before writing/producing one of 1968's goofiest would-be counter-culture products, *I Love You, Alice B. Toklas.* With co-conspirator/producer Larry Tucker, who also cowrote the script for *Bob & Carol*, Mazursky took full advantage of the American New Wave climate he was in, when studio execs were willing to roll the dice on untried directors and "hip" projects, as long as they didn't burn up budgets. Who needs a budget, when you've got sex?

Mazursky, who was in his late 30s with two daughters, was not necessarily a Woodstock-demo fellow traveller – but he certainly understood the "older" generation's fraught mixture of jealousy, restlessness, guilt and desire, and he understood West Coast culture. Bob & Carol is not a softcore sex romp but a lacerating, if sweet-natured, satire on late-'60s hipness and on Los Angeles fad-mongering in particular, a note it hits immediately with a disco-Handel-scored montage of a cheesy SoCal landscape of hot tubs, tai-chi and nudists. We're immediately tossed in to a 24-hour primal-scream group therapy session, led by a hilariously self-serious meta-shrink (Greg Mullavey), in which Bob (Robert Culp) and Carol (Natalie Wood) occupy a cynical corner, doing research for a documentary project of Bob's. Eventually – not guickly, nothing happens quickly in Mazursky's movie - amidst a very Mazurskian flurry of densely comic character bits, as the group tries to "get in touch" and "open up" despite their neuroses and backbiting, Bob and Carol surrender. An orgy of group hugs later, they emerge as an enlightened, loving unit, ready to embrace the world.

Trying to sell their newfound openness to their sceptical, more conventional friends Ted (Elliott Gould) and Alice (Dyan Cannon) is a similarly protracted task, and it takes the whole movie, climaxing (sorry) with the possibility of a genuine, full-on partner swap. This would become Mazursky's specialty: topical comedies charged with a rangy, unpredictable, sometimes meandering but always lovingly humane energy. As the topics come and go in terms of relevance, the filmmaker's distinctly affable personality is evergreen in its seductiveness. Here, it's a focus on imperfect behaviour and conjugal closeness, even in this crassest of Beverly Hills playgrounds, that was rare even at the time. You sense that the characters, just as much as the comedy they're inhabiting, mattered to Mazursky. (With the film's discursive conversations and palpable sense of shared amusement, I'd have bet that Mazursky had been heavily influenced by Eric Rohmer, but none of Rohmer's features had been released in the US yet.) When Bob confesses to an affair,



Carol doesn't get angry. It's Bob that gets angry, because she's not angry, but the probing argument they have goes on for minutes, ebbing and flowing, farcical in its way but also insightful about marital intimacy. Movies didn't ordinarily get this granular about the rhythmic give and take of marriage, nor did they ever break down the passive-aggressive man-woman split with such protracted diligence as in the scene where Ted and Alice, in and out of their own bed, grapple with the news of Bob's infidelity. She is rabidly dismayed by the news, revealing her conservative streak; having known already, Ted cares hardly at all, and only wants to have sex. Mazursky lets this dynamic play out for 12 whole minutes, the two characters sparring and pitching and fielding from their opposite corners, in a way and with an exhaustiveness that scans almost like an anthropological treatise on the combating priorities between the "new" male and female perspectives. In the same instant, they feel like a real couple.

You can imagine a director conceiving of the four characters as four psychosexual poles in a diagrammatic scheme analysing contemporary norms, but Mazursky likes the messiness of people too much for that, and the four young-parent faddists feel genuinely uncertain of themselves, defensive about their own shallowness, devoted to their spouses but not quite happy to be left behind as society seems to be changing around them. All this attention to nuance and realism only makes them funnier, of course; Ted and Alice, being less convinced of the progressive agenda at hand, are particularly resonant, reacting with frazzled alarm when the chips are down and peer pressure is supplemented with too much booze and pot.

Mazursky loved improvisation, and you can feel the relaxed spontaneity in virtually every freewheeling, as-long-as-it-takes set-piece. His cast are obviously enjoying themselves, and their strange mixture of styles, histories and personas also feels genuine, as just real couples often feel oddly, or roughly matched. (Looking at this quartet, you wouldn't be the first to think

that the men are both outmatched personality-wise, and the fortunate beneficiaries of what's come to be termed "interfacial" unions.) Wood was, of course, a seasoned movie star and Hollywood vet going back to when she was 5, having survived the often-crushing career transitions from child scene-stealer (*Miracle on 34th Street* [1947]) to teenage icon (*Rebel Without a Cause* [1955], *Splendor in the Grass* [1961], *West Side Story* [1961]) to adulthood (*Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice*). Wood did more than survive, of course, and her Carol is naturally luminescent, so deft and delicious and wide-eyed you can be forgiven for getting jealous on her husband's behalf when she flaunts a retaliatory tryst. Being the most bedazzled by the prospect of free love, Carol is the saucy trigger event for the others, and she's a sweet force of nature.

The rest of the casting wouldn't seem to have been as reflexive: who were these people? Culp had been lingering around episodic TV as a bland go-to B-lister for exactly the same span as Mazursky (they did episode work on many of the same shows, but never together), and his three-year run as the co-star of *I Spy* (1965-1968) had just ended. The rather misfit-y Gould, having scored in musical comedies on Broadway, had only made two other films – including a key role in William-Friedkin's *The Night They Raided Minsky's* (1968) – and still appears to be perhaps the unlikeliest leading man in that era of extremely unlikely leading men, from Gene Hackman to Alan Arkin to Donald Sutherland. (Not that Gould's awkwardness didn't win him an Oscar nomination here.) Mazursky may've arrived at these risky choices by either showbiz circumstance or creative gambler's strategy, but in either case Culp and Gould would seem to make for strange bedfellows in the era's hallmark cutting-edge comic essay on relationship experimentation.

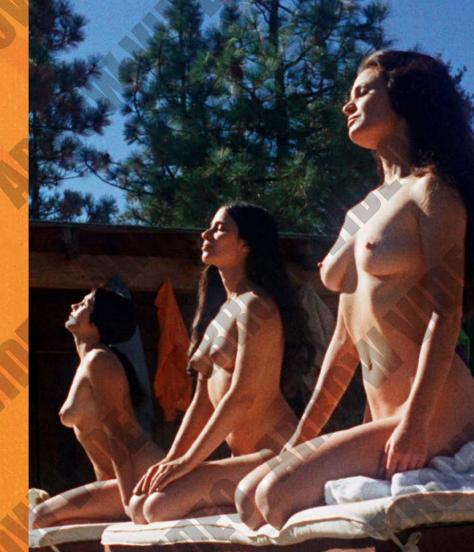
Cannon, on the other hand, was a natural, despite having gone essentially unnoticed through a decade of incidental TV work. Maybe she needed to blossom past 30 as she does here, letting us see the woman beneath the beauty queen. Like Paula Prentiss and Madeleine Kahn, a naturally brilliant

and gorgeous powerhouse of comic savviness that '70s Hollywood hardly knew what to do with, Cannon was a bright find for Mazursky, at once fleshy and golden, wryly amused and seething with moral shock. Alice is not only the quadrangle's emotional crisis point, she's our eyes and ears, expressing America's own uneasy cocktail of fear (of change) and desire (for change). She also got nominated, as did Mazursky and Tucker for their screenplay, and vet cinematographer Charles Lang.

Since "wife swapping" and "swinging" were and are private social trends hidden from researchers and statisticians, we have no way of knowing exactly what kind of influence on the "swinging '70s" Mazursky's movie might've had. It was certainly seen by critics and editorialists as a sign of the times, a symptom of, if not a contribution to, a tantalizing and pervasive cultural swerve, away from mid-century traditionalism and toward a great unknown. The sociosexual climate was a vast, mutating mystery no one could quite quantify or explain, and movies like Mazursky's (including terrific films like Mike Nichols' Carnal Knowledge, from 1971, and not-so-terrific additions, like Ted Post's The Harrad Experiment, from 1973) were probes launched into the void.

The findings were not optimistic; each of the films' scenarios – spoiler – arrive at dour and dispirited conclusions, even Mazursky's, as though filmmakers and audiences alike couldn't seriously imagine any other way for relationships to work beyond the way they had for millennia. Was it latent conservatism? Or was the Sexual Revolution, at its freest frontier, really just a pipe dream? Was Carol's vision of an unfettered modern paradise always an illusion? Or did we, to quote an entirely different movie from that pregnant day and age, blow it?

Michael Atkinson is a writer and journalist. He is frequent contributor to Sight & Sound, The Village Voice, In These Times, Al Screen and Moving Image Source.





CONTEMPORARY REVIEWS

compiled by James Blackford

Richard Combs, Monthly Film Bulletin, January 1970:

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* [1967]. is quite misplaced here, as the next scene establishes. Completely personal in its concerns and un-splenetic 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 sophisticate 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 [1968], 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 hand-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

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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.

Gordon Gow, Films and Filming, May 1970:

Mostly chucklesome, occasionally gauche: the strenuous little essay by Paul Mazursky and Larry Tucker makes game of two uptight married couples who are eager to embrace the new freedom before middle-age congeals them forever in their old conventional pattern of hypocrisy. Accustomed merely to keeping up with the Joneses, their basic drives are leading them towards a cautious affinity with flower power. This is funny and at the same time rather sad. And the drawback to the film is its reluctance, or inability, to give the sadness its due.

Especially awkward is the opening sequence, in which derisive satire is mated incongruously with images that are often quite beautiful. Bob and Carole (Robert Culp and Natalie Wood) drive high into the Californian hills in brilliant sunlight, while a choir sings the Hallelujah Chorus. Arriving presently at 'The Institute' – where ritual baths and physical exercises are accompanied by "I Know That My Redeemer Liveth" – they join other maladjusted people of varied ages in a weekend of therapy. Inhibitions are banished, confessions are encouraged, a spiritual release is achieved. Nothing is prohibited here – except violence. And ultimately, gazing and touching and weeping, the

freedom-seekers begin to huddle close around Bob and Carol, forming a contiguity-group: eloquent in itself, the imagery is mocked by the satiric attitude. If only some other way had been found to get things going, Mazursky and Tucker would have been on steadier ground. It is true, no doubt, that everything is open to question and that any forward-looking movement will attract a number of cranks. But the valuable processes which are derided in this sequence are probably embarrassing and even frightening to many who might benefit from them; and there seems to me a danger that the facile laugh, aligned with fear, could do serious harm in such cases by reinforcing hang-ups.

The start of Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice is therefore so irritating to me that I took quite some time to recover from my disgruntlement. But, once Bob and Carol have returned home and have begun to disclose their new perception to their best friends Ted and Alice (Elliott Gould and Dyan Cannon), the humour takes on a good deal of sophistication. On the assumption that beauty and truth are one and the same, Bob has told his wife about a transient affair he had with another woman, and Carol has been stunned by the news for only a few seconds, after which she rallies to her new emancipated stature and declares that she feels closer to Bob than ever before. When this information is imparted to Ted and Alice over a late-night pipe of "beautiful downtown Burbank grass", reactions are really very choice. To be fair to Natalie Wood and Robert Culp, one must concede that Bob and Carol have the most difficult assignments, being nearer to realism while Ted and Alice are poised superbly upon the brink of caricature. But even when this advantage is working most strongly in their favour, Gould and Dyan Cannon perform with a marvellous restraint and their mutations are a joy to behold. For Ted and Alice there is an immediate daze, a bewilderment and a sickness, a night of doubt when sex is thwarted by the new ideas that have been thrust into their bourgeois minds. Then, by degrees, they attempt to emulate. A range of amusing situations can be exploited from here on, and the movie gets better and better all the time.





ABOUT THE TRANSFER

Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with 1.0 mono audio. The master was prepared in High Definition by Sony Pictures and delivered to Arrow Films.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by Francesco Simeoni
Associate Producers Liane Cunje and James Blackford
Executive Producer Kevin Lambert
Technical Producer James White
QC Manager Nora Mehenni
Blu-ray Authoring and Subtitling The Engine House Media Services
Artist Ignatius Fitzpatrick
Design Oink

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Michael Atkinson, Rita Belda, David Cairns, Aodan Coburn, Sam Dunn, Elliott Gould, Hollywood Classics International, Laurie Krohn, Terrill Lee Lankford, Alistair Leach, Adrian Martin, Sigrid Larsen, Leroy Moore, Edwin Samuelson, Sony Pictures

