

Reel Outsider: A Tribute to Arthur Penn



Arthur Penn and wife Peggy Maurer at the 57th annual Berlinale.
(Berlin International Film Festival—2/17/07)
Photo Credit: Thomas Faehnrich/WENN/Newscom

By Jarrod Emerson SPECIAL FOR FILMS FOR TWO®

In the midst of one of the most turbulent decades in its history, American cinema went through its own revolutionary transformation. The Hays Production code had all but died, and as the old studio heads retired, a new generation of directors emerged, bringing a new set of influences with them. One director of change was the late Arthur Penn. Although his chief claim to fame now is *Bonnie & Clyde*, Penn delivered a number of compelling stories—many of them groundbreaking—both onscreen and on-stage. Towards the end of his life, Penn was also an executive producer for *Law & Order*, one of the most successful franchises in television history.

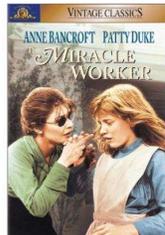
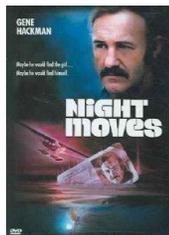
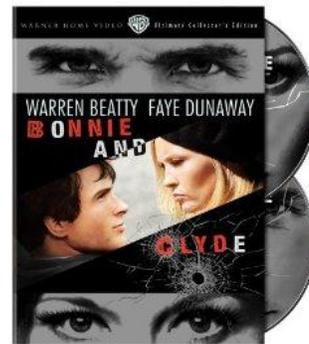
Born in Philadelphia in 1922, Arthur Penn died of congestive heart failure in New York City on September 28, 2010 (one day after his 88th birthday). Penn is survived by Peggy Maurer (his spouse of 54 years) and their two children. However, Penn's numerous distinctive characters and ideas remain as intact as they ever were. Penn brought a new complexity and darkness to American cinema, and the impact of his work remains to this day. While Penn may no longer be with us, the contribution he made to American cinema endures.

Most of Penn's films are a variation on the theme of the "outsider." Whether this character is a troublemaker, a victim of circumstance, or a person caught up in a web of deception, the "outsider" is always present in Penn's best work.

To write this tribute, I watched the following nine films (some of which I had seen before, but many of which were new to me):

- *Alice's Restaurant*
- *Bonnie & Clyde*
- *The Chase*
- *The Left-Handed Gun*
- *Little Big Man*
- *Mickey-One*
- *The Miracle Worker*
- *The Missouri Breaks*
- *Night Moves*

**Based on my sample,
I recommend you watch
these four Penn films →**



1.) BONNIE & CLYDE (1969): *Bonnie & Clyde* is Arthur Penn's best-known film, and it's easy to see why. It's a film rich in character development with a sharp script by David Newman, Robert Benton, and the un-credited Robert Towne. Although Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway are well-remembered for their title roles, the film also boasts a strong supporting cast, including Michael J. Pollard, Gene Hackman, and Estelle Parsons.

One of the film's best moments comes right at the beginning: Clyde lures Bonnie out of her apartment to get a Coca Cola, and then begins to reveal what he does for a "living." When he flashes his pistol at her, she strokes the tip of it with her fingers. In this variation on the "outsider" theme, Clyde offers Bonnie an escape from the painful norm. Clyde is attractive and dangerous, and this is clearly a turn-on for Bonnie. Following a small robbery, Clyde manages to call Bonnie out on her disenchantment with life. In this case, the "outlaw" state offers a chance, perhaps her only chance, to escape a humdrum life. Clyde understands that Bonnie is a closet rebel itching to break free.

After this brilliant beginning, numerous memorable scenes unfold as Bonnie & Clyde recruit new people for their gang. Michael J. Pollard brings an awkward, shy, and childlike persona to the group as driver "C.W. Moss," and Gene Hackman and Estelle

Parsons give strong turns as “Buck and Blanche Barrow.” Parsons’ Blanche may seem like the most clueless and reluctant member, but by taking an immediate dislike to Bonnie, she clearly knows how the story must end.

Both Francois Truffaut and Jean-Luc Goddard turned down offers to direct *Bonnie and Clyde*. Nevertheless the film features some trademarks of the French New Wave, including drastic shifts in overall style, as well as rapid, abrupt editing. *Bonnie & Clyde* also broke new ground by featuring an unprecedented amount of graphic violence which helped make it popular with more youthful audiences. Although some critics were appalled at the violence, the film received ten Academy Award nominations, winning one for Estelle Parsons (Best Supporting Actress Oscar for the role of Blanche) and one for Burnett Guffrey (Best Cinematography). In the years since, several filmmakers such as Terrance Malick have credited *Bonnie & Clyde* as a major influence.

2.) NIGHT MOVES (1975): Another film of Penn’s that has proven remarkably timeless is *Night Moves*. Gene Hackman stars as “Harry Moseby,” a retired NFL player turned private detective. Moseby is hired by has-been actress “Arlene Iverson” (Janet Ward) to bring back her missing daughter “Delly” (played by Melanie Griffith in her first credited screen performance). Although Moseby quickly locates Delly in the Florida Keys and brings her back to Los Angeles, the case turns out to be more complex than he anticipated. Meanwhile Moseby is also having problems with his wife “Ellen” (Susan Clark).

Ever present in *Night Moves* is Penn’s knack for depicting the alienated individual. This time our hero, Harry Moseby, caught up in a conspiracy, slides into the role of the outsider in both his personal and professional lives. As the story progresses, Moseby becomes an increasingly bitter individual, balking at the deception that is oozing into his life.

Although the film was not a box-office success at the time of its release, *Night Moves* is recognized now as a classic piece of Neo-Noir cinema. Unlike the tough “Sam Spade” character played by Humphrey Bogart in the 40s, the Moseby character has shortcomings and a breaking point. Some critics have called *Night Moves* Penn’s “undiscovered masterpiece,” and I agree.

3.) THE MIRACLE WORKER (1962): Another timeless tale is Penn’s adaptation of William Gibson’s play *The Miracle Worker*. Like the television and stage versions (both of which Penn also directed), the film is a dramatization of the early life of legendary deaf-blind activist “Helen Keller” as a child (played by Patty Duke in an Oscar-winning performance). Helen’s parents have become desperate to communicate with their daughter, so they hire tutor “Annie Sullivan” (played by Anne Bancroft who also won an Oscar). Though Helen initially proves almost impossible to reach, Sullivan refuses to back down, enduring the most intense test of both her skills and her person.

In one particularly gripping scene, Sullivan attempts to teach Helen table manners after witnessing her use bare hands to grab at food on the table. They engage in a physically and emotionally exhausting battle in which Helen does everything in her power to

escape Sullivan. This intense, raw sequence lasts nearly 9 minutes, and Penn never pulls back. Rarely have so many hurdles faced by either the victim or the rescuer been so effectively summed up in one cinematic encounter.

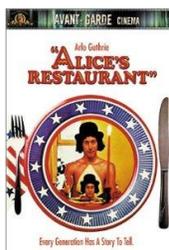
In *The Miracle Worker*, Penn's core theme is carried by Patty Duke's magnificent performance as one of the most helpless, sympathetic "outsiders" in American history. Helen is not a troublemaker or a force of evil but an intelligent young girl trapped in a dark, silent world. Sullivan herself is also a marginal "outsider" burdened with guilt over the death of her brother Jimmy. Sullivan sees Helen as an undeserving victim, someone who must be rescued before she hits the point of no return. And watching this tale is just as intense today as it was back in 1962!

4.) THE CHASE (1966): A complex tale of corruption, *The Chase* is an ensemble drama that tells the story of a small Texas town whose sheriff is desperately trying to play by the rules.

The film opens with inmate "Charlie 'Bubber' Reeves" (Robert Redford) escaping from prison and trekking towards home. As news of the prison break spreads, various people with grudges begin planning their revenge. Once again, the theme here is alienation. Yes, Bubber is the antagonist, but he's painted more as a young, lost, misunderstood character than as a truly bad man. And although "Sheriff Calder" (Marlon Brando) takes every possible measure to avoid conflict so he can bring Bubber safely into custody, in the end he fails.

What makes *The Chase* timeless is its complexity. The scene in which three vigilantes beat Calder to a bloody pulp exhibited a level of violence new to Hollywood films, and served as a hint of what was to come with *Bonnie and Clyde*. The film's willingness to deal openly with promiscuity and racism were also daring in its day, and remain as dramatic today as they were then.

Unfortunately, some Penn films have not held up quite so well over time, even though they may have been very popular when first released...

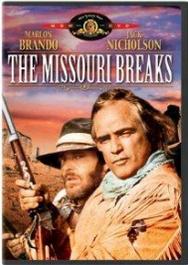


ALICE'S RESTAURANT (1969): A prime example of an Arthur Penn film that fails the test of time is "hippie drama" *Alice's Restaurant*, based on Arlo Guthrie's famous 18-minute long counter-culture anthem

Starring Arlo Guthrie as himself, the film, like the song, is an anti-war fable set against the backdrop of America's escalating involvement in Vietnam. The plot of *Alice's Restaurant* (such as it is) revolves around Guthrie's arrest for littering and how that fluke event factored into his attempts to avoid the draft.

Both the song and the film were classics of their time, but *Alice's Restaurant* doesn't work well for present-day audiences. Although many aspects of "Hippie Culture" were considered taboo back then, they have become commonplace in today's world. For

example, it's unlikely that a man would be arrested today simply for having long hair. So for those who did not experience the '60s firsthand, it's often hard to relate to *Alice's Restaurant*. Ironically *Bonnie and Clyde*, a period piece set in the '30s and released two years before *Alice's Restaurant*, does a much better job depicting universal themes, and remains just as strong today as was back in 1967.



THE MISSOURI BREAKS (1976): Sometimes a film like *Night Moves* fails to find an audience when it's released, but like a fine wine, it ages well. Unfortunately this is not the case with *The Missouri Breaks*, Penn's much anticipated return to Westerns. Jack Nicholson plays cattle rustler "Tom Logan," out to avenge the death of one of his gang members at the hands of ruthless land baron "David Braxton" (John McLiam). When Braxton grows suspicious, he hires bounty hunter "Lee Clayton" (Marlon Brando), to off Logan's men one by one.

Expectations for *The Missouri Breaks* ran high based on the supposed star potential of the Brando/Nicholson combination, but Penn suffered notorious problems with Brando (who had long since lost his artistic control). According to Penn, at a certain point he decided to just let Brando do as he pleased... and it shows. Brando's Clayton character is both incoherent and inconsistent, making the film as a whole non-engaging, with only a few humorous moments. And since the romance between Nicholson's Logan character and Kathleen Lloyd (playing Braxton's daughter "Jane") has no chemistry, all the supporting characters ultimately feel useless in the end.

MY BOTTOM LINE: While some of Penn's work has aged badly, many distinctive ideas remain as intact as they ever were. What will live forever is the new sensibility that Arthur Penn helped usher in to American cinema in the mid-60s.

Other films by Arthur Penn which remain to be seen in future include:

- *Dead of Winter* (1987)
- *Four Friends* (1981)
- *Inside* (1996)
- *Penn & Teller Get Killed* (1989)
- *Target* (1985)

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Ohio-native Jarrod Emerson has been residing in Chicago for the past four years. He is a graduate of Columbia College Chicago, and is currently enrolled in courses at the Second City Training Center. He has been working with FF2 since 2007, and leaps at any opportunity (or excuse) to see more classic films!