

Movies

'Doors': The Time To Hesitate Is Now

3/1/91 By Hal Hinson
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Whirling in delirious circles, his eyes turned inward, focused on the lizard brain, the Jim Morrison of Oliver Stone's "The Doors" is a rock Dionysus. The music was pagan, tribal, the concerts long slithering rides on the snake's back, with Morrison mounted on the serpent's head, death-obsessed, wasted, cracking the whip on the bacchanal. He sang about strange days, soft asylum and the end; he sang about breaking on through to the other side. And, sitting in his foxhole in Vietnam, Oliver Stone bought it. He bought it hook, line and sinker.

Millions of others did too, of course. It was a movement, the '60s, a genuine moment in time, and that's what Stone is struggling to define. He wants to sweep us up in the frenzied spirit of stoned excess, pull us into the psychedelic spirals of Morrison's dance, inside his freaky abandon, to capture for us—make us *feel*—the hallucinatory rapture of the period. It's a fool's

See MOVIES, B4, Col. 1

Oliver Stone's 'The Doors'

MOVIES, From B1

game he's indulged in and, quite naturally, he makes a fool of himself. The film is an absurdity—muddled, self-serious, alienating, a stone drag.

"The Doors" is like a party where everybody's tripping except you. Stone turns the '60s not into the decade of peace and love and rock-and-roll, but into the decade of acting out, of shameless, self-delusional indulgence. The film could strike a killing blow to our nostalgia for those days. You don't want to be there. I don't care what Dylan said, everyone must *not* get Stoned.

The picture—which Stone wrote along with J. Randall Johnson—begins with a scrambled childhood memory in which Morrison, while on a family car trip, sees an aged Indian dying beside the road. It jumps rapidly, like a phonograph needle skidding across the biographical record, to Morrison's arrival in California and immersion into the Venice Beach scene, his days in film school at UCLA (which he quit after his first effort was blasted by his classmates), his first encounters with Ray Manzarek (Kyle MacLachlan), who was to become his keyboardist, and Pamela Courson (Meg Ryan), who would become his girlfriend and muse.

It shows Morrison (Val Kilmer) wandering the beachfront with his loping, panther gait, shirtless, paperback in hand, as if he were desperate for someone to notice how darned

cool he is, how singular. It shows him with his notebooks of poetry and drawings, his litter of books by Artaud and Rimbaud. It shows him singing his first song to Manzarek, who jumps up immediately and suggests they start a band. "This planet is screaming for change, Morrison," he says. "We have to make the myths."

These myths, as rough and inchoate as they are, are what Stone has chosen as his subject. He's not content with just placing Morrison under his microscope; he wants to go deeper, to break on through to the essence of the essence. Stone makes a brief appearance in the film, as a bearded university film professor, and that's essentially what he is, a lecturer in hipster drag. He's the village explainer, and what he does in "The Doors" is expose himself as the ultimate square—Mr. Jones, in the flesh.

Stone takes us into the desert with Morrison and Pamela and the other members of the band—Manzarek, Robby Krieger (Frank Whaley), John Densmore (Kevin Dillon)—for the group's communal peyote ritual, and has the audacity to stage Morrison's hallucinations, to turn his subconscious into a circus of surrealistic clichés, as if he were attempting to annotate the lyrics to his songs. Instead, he explains them away, kills them. That roadside Indian appears and the movie collapses in a camp heap.

What's most peculiar about the film is Stone's attitude toward his hero. He's indulging in hagiography, but of a very weird sort. A good part of the film is dedicated to demonstrating what a drunken, boring lout Morrison was. But while on the one hand Stone acknowledges how basically pointless and destructive his excesses became, on the other, he keeps implying that it's all part of the creative process—that Morrison's singing and writing were only a part of his artistry, and that the revolutionary daring of his life was of equal value. And, of course, Morrison was the genuine item. He really killed himself, and Stone—who stages his death in the bath like David's "Death of Marat"—loves that most of all. This drunk dies in the tub and Stone thinks that it's a hero's act, that Morrison has finally "broken through."

The estimation of Morrison's work, too, is out of whack. There were always too many screaming butterflies in Morrison's lyrics, too much of the leopard and the cobra, but Stone accepts it as revelatory, as pop genius. When he pans across the grave sites in Pere Lachaise—past the tombs of Oscar Wilde, Moliere and Rossini—he does so without irony, as if Morrison, the rock poet, deserves to be in the pantheon of true greatness.

Amid all this trippy incoherence, the performances are almost irrelevant. Kilmer does a noteworthy impersonation of the singer, especially onstage, where he gets Morrison's self-absorption. He gets his coiled explosiveness too, but the element of danger in Morrison is missing.

The other actors get shoved into the background. In one scene, Pamela is asked to give her position in the band, and she replies, "Ornament." That's perfect. Ryan is nothing more than an Age of Aquarius bauble. She plays the innocent, the Lizard King initiate, and her function, primarily, is to react with Bambi-eyed shock to Morrison's infidelities and death jousts. Her opposite number, played Catwoman style by Kathleen Quinlan, is a journalist and part-time black witch who urges Morrison to drink human blood and do I'm not sure what else—drip hot candle wax in his bellybutton, maybe. MacLachlan is the only true delight. His natural otherworldliness keeps him at an ironic arm's-length from the film's tumescent religiosity. He's like a blessed particle of antimatter in Stone's turgid universe.

It's easy to see why Morrison—who wrote one lyric saying, "Father, I want to *kill* you . . ."—was Stone's kind of guy. After all, Stone did slip a tab of acid into his own father's drink. With "The Doors," the director appears to be living vicariously through his hero; he wants to *be* Morrison, to be the Morrison of filmmakers, to ring the alarms and snap us out of our bourgeois comas. In "The End," Morrison urged everyone to crowd on board the "blue bus." "The blue bus," he wrote, "is calling us." But the next line could have been directed at Stone himself: "Driver, where you takin' us?"

The Doors, at area theaters, is rated R for heavy drug content and strong sexuality and language.