

Great Scott! The Best of Jay Scott's Movie Reviews

“In the modern world, canonization has been secularized – there’s Saint Genet (so dubbed by Sartre), and there’s Saint Joan (of Baez), and there’s Saint Nostalgia (everyone’s grandmother), and now there’s Saint Warhol (the Pope of Pop).” JAY SCOTT (1987)

And now, it seems, Saint Jay. The underlying irony of *Great Scott!*, a new collection of reviews by the late *Globe and Mail* film critic, would not be lost on Jay Scott (1949-1993). With its publication Jay himself appears well along the road to secular canonization.

The utterly hagiographic tributes by the *Globe*'s editor in chief William Thorsell and former *Saturday Night* editor Robert Fulford which open this book certainly push him in that direction. Thorsell calls him “the writing hero of the *Globe and Mail* newsroom.” Fulford, who writes the introduction, waxes rhapsodic that, “reading him feels something like watching a first-class athlete, one of those people who create excitement just by their presence.” If this isn’t canonizing enough, Fulford adds that “the audience found itself through Scott. By becoming a centre of discourse, he helped movie goers in Toronto to make connections among themselves and form an articulate community.”

Great Scott! appears to be more of a memorial tribute than, as advertised, a collection of “the best” pieces from a prodigious, impressive, and, yes, uneven career in film journalism. While the editors’ indulgence is understandable, it hurts the collection. In their desire to canonize Scott, the editors have inadvertently overshadowed their subject’s strengths.

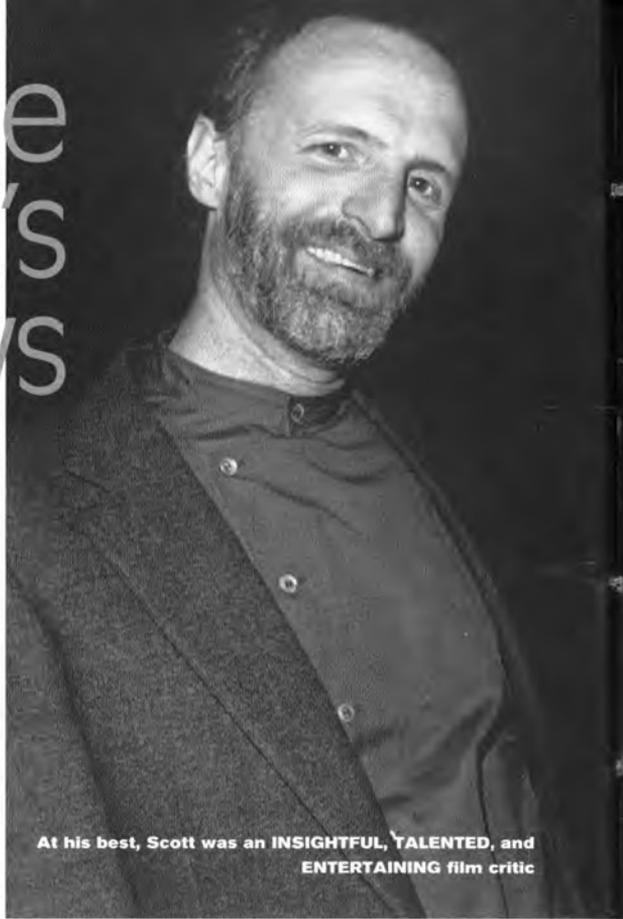
For one thing, the book is much too long. Do we really need to reread Scott’s facile reviews of *Jaws: The Revenge*, *The Lonely Lady*, *Sheena Queen of the Jungle*,

or *Arachnophobia*? What is the purpose of including a pedestrian profile of Arnold Schwarzenegger (bigger sales?), while astonishingly his writing on Atom Egoyan or Paul Cox is not. A more judicious selection would have better served the reader and the writer.

At his best, particularly from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s, Scott was an insightful, talented, and entertaining film critic. His incisive reviews of *Interiors*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Raging Bull*, *Bad Timing: A Sensual Obsession*, *Tess*, *The Grey Fox*, and *Les fleurs sauvages* did expand the boundaries of daily film journalism and remain examples for any aspiring critic. This anthology does contain enough of these gems to sustain the reader’s interest, but there is far too much ore in between.

A welcome dimension of *Great Scott!* is that it affords us a chance to chart Scott’s evolution as a critic. For example, his irritable interpretation of Kubrick’s *The Shining* is engaging; his contention that *Black Stallion* director Carroll Ballard “will be remembered as a great filmmaker,” puzzling; his impassioned, unreconciled attitude toward Vietnam (Scott was an American ex-patriot) in his reviews of the many Vietnam films, intriguing; his intelligent and articulate admiration for Fassbinder, moving; his constant and laudable distrust of Hollywood spectacle, invigorating.

Part of that evolution, it must also be said, involves a predilection for glib asides, insiderist put-downs, and supercilious dismissals. They are found throughout the book, and while some are hilarious and entirely appropriate (after all, he did have to sit through some very bad movies), others are sneeringly gratuitous. Their presence also begs an important question about the work of “simply, one of the best film reviewers



At his best, Scott was an INSIGHTFUL, TALENTED, and ENTERTAINING film critic

ever” (so says the cover blurb): do they contribute to the development of film culture or reinforce the smug superiority of *Globe* readers?

More seriously disappointing, however, is that in the latter years Scott’s passion seems dissipated, his critical rigour less consistent (especially reviews of *Something Wild*, *Dear America*, *Pretty Woman*). That passion is still pulsing through his writing on Kurosawa’s *Ran*, Arcand’s *Jésus de Montréal*, and in his marvelous evisceration of Spielberg’s *Jurassic Park*, but in general it is intermittent and less brilliant and sustained.

Beyond the fascinating questions this book raises about the apparent necessity for authority figures and arbiters of taste (to repeat Fulford’s unfortunate phrase, “a centre of discourse”) to exist in our popular cultural life, *Great Scott!* is valuable inasmuch as it preserves several but certainly not all of Scott’s best reviews. Moreover, all proceeds from the book’s sales go to the Canadian Foundation for AIDS Research. But reader beware – skip the foreword and introduction and go straight to the reviews. Do what Jay Scott did at his best, judge for yourself ● *GREAT SCOTT! The Best of Jay Scott’s Movie Reviews*, McClelland & Stewart, Toronto, 1994. 357pp., \$19.99.