

The Last Picture Show-1971: Where, for all of us, love's illusions live and die.

This is a film about icons: small town America, Hollywood movies, the local cinema, country & western music, classic Cadillacs and Fords, and a graduation class in the town of Anarene, Texas, in 1951 (Anarene is the fictional name given to Archer City, the actual locale for this movie – and incidentally, where the shell of The Royal cinema still stands).

The noise of WW2 has faded, it's now the second half of the 20th century and America is on the move – internationally and nationally. The world is changing, and the winds of changes are not limited to dust squalls only down Main Street, especially for two young high school students in their final year: Sonny Crawford (Timothy Bottoms) and Duane Jackson (Jeff Bridges).

Like other small towns across the west, Anarene is dying – financially, culturally, socially and emotionally. Nothing much happens each day. Traffic is virtually non-existent; heck, there's not even a traffic light. Those who can, leave; those who can't – like Sonny, Duane and their school friends – must make do with whatever game in town there is...

Which means they spend a lot of time in the pool hall and picture theater owned by Sam the Lion (Ben Johnson) and the diner across Main Street run by Genevieve (Eileen Brennan). If not there, they're off sparking around town and maybe getting into trouble with the local prostitutes; or testing their mettle, so to speak, with their own girl friends, Duane's Jacy Farrow (Cybill Shepherd) and Sonny's Charlene Duggs (Sharon Taggart).

While Duane's difficulties center upon keeping all other males away from Jacy – she being the prettiest girl in town – Sonny and Charlene break up, thus allowing Sonny to innocently fall into a situation with a much older married woman, Ruth Popper (Cloris Leachman), and with the inevitable complications of such a lopsided affair. Hovering around them are Jacy's mother, Lois Farrow (Ellen Burstyn) and father, Gene Farrow (Robert Glenn); a local stud and serious womanizer, Abilene (Clu Gulager); Billy (Sam Bottoms), a mentally-challenged helper in Sam's pool hall; and Lester Marlow (Randy Quaid), who introduces Jacy to skinny-dipping at some rich dude's place, much to Duane's displeasure. How they all interact to resolve their emotional troubles forms the basis of the second and third acts.

But the focal point is Sam, Sam the Lion, and you'll find out how he got that name when you see this movie. Everybody comes to the pool hall at some time, and all the kids go to the movies at The Royal, where Sam shows great movies from the 1930s and 1940s. Ben Johnson, better known for his many roles in westerns, deservedly won Best Supporting Actor as the serious, sage and sentimental ol' timer. Equally, Cloris Leachman won the Best Supporting Actress Oscar for her work as Ruth Popper.

When I first saw this movie in 1972, I knew I had seen an American classic: picture perfect mise-en-scene, heart-breaking script, beautiful black and white photography that virtually puts you in that time and place, and a group of mostly young actors who acted and melded flawlessly under the direction of Peter Bogdanovich. Wisely, Bogdanovich avoided canned, moody music, allowing instead local radios, juke boxes etc to provide the perfect pitch of Hank Williams and other greats to keep this timeless illusion alive.

Forty years after I saw it for the first time, I still think that TLPS is one of the finest American movies ever made.

And just like the old saw says, they just don't make 'em like this any more. More's the pity.

Highest recommendation for all lovers of great cinema.

Rating: 9

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