Little Big Man: they cheered the Indians

By Bruce Peetz

Shakespearean comedies of the 16th century, tragedy and the comedies of the Restoration - all these elements of real human existence, mixed as we find them in our life. Perhaps, in moments on the screen seem more intense than similar moments in our own lives, but the experiences related in Alice's Restaurant were plausible - in fact, the accidental incidents - and hence demonstrative of the dimensions of human existence available to us. A new kind of film realism was born.

Little Big Man, Penn's first film since Alice's Restaurant, is an adaptation of the same direction, but goes one better by making the stage that of American history. Now the history of the textbooks - Custer is diminished, many of his real dimensions, those of vain glory hunting and cold-blooded murder, are portrayed with human stature heretofore denied them in movies. Indeed, they are the real heroes. Called "human beings" their own tongue, the Cheyenne are depicted as generous, wry, erotic, honorable and brave, where the whites in the film are pompous, ruthless, cunning and just plain mean. No wonder audiences are cheering the Indians during the scenes of Custer's Last Stand.

The plot affords an almost incredible sequence of pinpoint-like backbits from hilarity to horror, paralysing the reversals of the life history of the character, Jack Crabb (Dustin Hoffman) - who also narrates the whole tale from his vantage point as a 120-year-old in a nursing home. This man is both realistic - an old Indian figure that has been part of the popular American scene of Indians, who he is or why the world has him, the problems of the Cheyenne, where Crabb loses his family, and takes up with Indian wife Crabb has, receives the name of Little Big Man. But in a fit of cowardice, dies in a battle with US soldiers, Crabb deserts to the whites. His monumen-
tal moves follow - school, a sojourn with a make-a-kill hunter, reunion with the lost sister, four wives, back and forth to the Cheyenne, three massacres, some time spent as a drunk, near-suicide, and finally the climactic battle of Little Big Horn.

The incongruities of the plot are a little reminiscent of the black comedy of Joseph Heller's Catch-22 or John Barth's The Sot-weed Factor (the latter never made into a movie, alas). But the events are plausible, and they prevent our disdaining them as merely fantasy. The plight of a man who is neither white nor Indian is bound to make the role perfect for Hoffman, who seems to have become typecast as everybody's displaced person - bumbling, victimized, not quite sure of himself. (Is it or why the world keeps him around, but somehow managing to preserve a semblance of the Indian who he is and somehow he survives, or at least (as in Midnight Cowboy) dies gracefully. An ad-libbed and identifiable character, for whom among us has not felt victimized at one time or another? Whatever Hoffman's abilities as an actor may be, he can handle this sort of role superbly.

Crabb's blurred identity makes for one of the most perfect of Dustin Hoffman's, who seems to have become typecast as everybody's displaced person - bumbling, victimized, not quite sure of himself. (Is it or why the world keeps him around, but somehow managing to preserve a semblance of the Indian who he is and somehow he survives, or at least (as in Midnight Cowboy) dies gracefully. An ad-libbed and identifiable character, for whom among us has not felt victimized at one time or another? Whatever Hoffman's abilities as an actor may be, he can handle this sort of role superbly.

His performance is backed by a strong supporting cast, including Faye Dunaway as the nymphomaniac wife of a sadistic, puritanical minister (Thayer David), Martin Balsam as a medical doctor, a comic, keenly perceptive, and Richard Mulligan as General George Arm-

strong Custer.

But the performance that stands out in my mind is that of Chief Dan George, a full-blooded Cheyenne, who plays Crabb's adopted grandfather, Old Lodge Skins. The popularity for Little Big Man notes that director Penn used real Indians, not painted actors, and that the Cheyenne themselves gave technical advice on Indian rituals, folklore, and more. There are no "Uncle Toms" nor the Indians speak the traditional Hollywood dialect of grunts and "yuhhs" - their speeches are delivered in English (understood to be, of course, in Cheyenne). Thus Chief Dan George is to a great extent playing himself, a real Indian chief, and his perform-

ance reflects it. Almost alone in a world of fools, cutthroats and victims of fate, Lodge Skins is every inch a chief, steeped in wisdom, generous in spirit, and rich in humor. His are the best lines in the movie. (He is blessed with the power of visions: predic-
cting Crabb's future: "I see you with three wives, crawling from buffalo hide to buffalo hide. A mighty copulation."

On the fate of the Cheyenne, "There have never been very many human beings, but there is a limitless supply of white men."

I have dwelled at length on the human beings in the film. It is more difficult to elaborate on its topical merits, perhaps because each tragedy in swiftly mitigated by Hoffman's dry wit, which inevitably puts him back into the absurdity of existence. Tragedy in Little Big Man is essentially bound up with death, and each brutally portrayed death in the film delivers a vis-
ceral impact. The massacre of the Indians are especially horri-
fying, with Custer's cavalry swooping in for carnage to the music of fire and drum. And in Soldier Blue, no attempt is made to either conceal or glorify the gore of massacre.

Custer's Last Stand is the dramatic climax of the film, but not the emotional one, for the film ends with two achingly poignant scenes which in a sense sum up the ultimate meaning - or meaninglessness - of all that has gone before, or will come. Old Lodge Skins, having wit-
nessed the decimation of his people, "decides it is a good day to die," and, hobbling along supported by Jack Crabb, he assents to a hill above the reser-
vation. Surveying the valley below, and figuratively, the past and future of his tribe, he knows that their fate is extinction, or something near to it. He calls upon the Great Spirit to take him, ties down, and there fol-

low - only a thundershower. "Sometimes the magic does not work," he says, then the two descend the hill. But in the transition to the next and final scene we know Lodge Skins must have died, for we end with Crabb, at 120, awaiting the end which must eventually come to us all.

M.I.T. Logarithms need 2nd Tenor and Bass. If you would like to try out, call Bob Orloff or Marc Livitrani at Ph Delt, x206, 247-0691.

CONCERTS EAST PRESENTS

MUSIC FROM MARLBORO

Presents the

THE M.I.T. HUMANITIES SERIES 1970-1971 presents

THE FINE ARTS QUARTET

Quartet No. 3 (Boston Premiers) Quartet in D, Op. 97 Quartet No. 4

Milton Baldwitt Wolfgang Mozart Bella Bartok

TICKETS: $3.00

Next Concert in the Humanities Series

MUSIC FROM MARLBORO March 21, 1971

with BLOODROCK

SUNDAY, MARCH 14 AT 8:00 P.M.

TICKETS: $4.50, $5.50, $6.50 available Feb. 22 at Box Office. Mail orders accepted only at Harvard Union of Students box office. Box office open daily 10 A.M. to 9 P.M. (except Harvard Union of Students box office open daily 10 A.M. to 9 P.M. Tues., Thurs. and Fri.)

BOSTON GARDEN

COMING APRIL 3: THREE DOG NIGHT