The Deer Hunter misses the target

The Deer Hunter, starring Robert De Niro, John Savage, Meryl Streep, Christopher Walken, Screenplay by Deric Washburn, directed by Michael Cimino, a Universal/EMI picture; now at the Charles 1-2-3.

By Joel West

The Deer Hunter has been getting a big build-up. It garnered 9 Academy Award nominations, including Best Picture. Critics are calling it the best film of 1978, and of course a hefty $5 price tag. For all the local engagement, Sack has even instituted a special ticket arrangement, with printed tickets, advance sales, and of course a hefty $5 price tag.

After all the build-up Deer Hunter has received, it was disappointing to see the movie and discover that it wasn't even a good film, let alone a great one. Beneath the tangled fabric of myth that has been created lies very little indeed.

The movie covers the period from the late 60's to the fall of Saigon in 1975. It's centered around a small steel town in Pennsylvania, where Mike (De Niro), Nick (Christopher Walken) and Steve (John Savage) live and work; they spend their leisure time hunting deer. Ruged individualist, De Niro exposes the "one clean spot" philosophy of hunting which makes him a noble sportsman rather than a butcher of helpless animals.

It takes Cimino almost half of the three-hour picture to get the trio out of Clariton, PA into Vietnam. When he does, he jumps right into battle, and we are supposed to be stunned, watershed by the sudden shift and lack of anything to identify with in the green jungles of Vietnam (actually filmed in Thailand). Unfortunately, this jump, like the other jumps in the film, is meant to be subtle, or sophisticated, or moving, or anything but straightforward; in this case, by abandoning the straightforward path, all Cimino has added to the film is confusion and ambiguity -- the sort that obscures the point he is trying to make.

An Oscar for cinematography would certainly be well-deserved; it is probably the best-made picture in years, from the standpoint of sheer visual excellence. From flame-throwers in Southeast Asia to a rocky vista in the Cascades, Director of Photography Vilmos Zsigmond has made a film which each camera angle, each choice of backdrop is unusual, realistic, and original.

And therein lies the problem: a lack of reality. Cimino appears to have lost sight of the fact that a movie is only a symbol, it must convey or suggest a reality rather than attempt to be one. The draw-out wedding scene in Clariton doesn't add any substance to the nuptial flavor about it, but it is very clear that this is not a documentary, these are not real people but actors being paid good money to make noises and stand there.

The acting is not bad -- Walken is excellent, Alt is wonderful, but Rutanya Alda (as Savage's wife) has a magnificent scene when she is too defeated to utter a sound. De Niro, incongruously, looks more at ease in a tuxedo than is supposed "normal" attire of the blue collar worker; Cimino has solved this problem by leaving him in his Ranger dress uniform for the last third of the movie. As Mike, De Niro is good, but is somewhat handicapped by the absolutely unreal nature of the character written.

The message Cimino is trying to convey is obvious enough: the war is pointless, it destroyed people mentally and physically, it was grim and awful and all that 70's hindsight. If this had been made in 1969, it would have said something valuable and original; now, it is by no means the definite Vietnam War movie, and doesn't even do a good job of presenting the conventional truisms it draws from the period. While it is worth seeing out of curiosity, if you never see the Deer Hunter, it will be Universal's loss but not yours.

Halloween is no treat


By Shave Wilson

The surprising thing about this film is that it is ever made it to the screen. The premise sounds like that of a campfire-side horror tale, and the script must read like a documentary, (Chapter 5: Common Mistakes) yet the sum of the parts elicits more than a few well-deserved screams from the audience.

A knife-wielding young person commits a murder, and is sent to an asylum. He breaks out and goes home to raise more havoc (presumably to celebrate the anniversary of his first Halloween killing). Good guy Donald Pleasance, musing something about evil, chase him only to spend the night hanging around the scene of the crime until everyone is out of sight.

The remarkable suspense, as you can see, (Please turn to page 8)