Back to the past with "Peggy Sue"

PEGGY SUE GOT MARRIED
Directed by Francis Ford Coppola
Starring Kathleen Turner and Nicolas Cage
Opening Oct. 10 at the Cheli and Somer-ville cinemas.

By PETER DUNN

If the idea of going back into the past and possibly, through one's ac- tions, changing the course of history is not unfamiliar, it might be because this concept has already been used in past movies. Most recently, it was in "Back to the Fu-ture" Michael J. Fox accidentally travelled to smalltown America of the 50's and al- most nullified his own existence by having his own mother go goo-goo for him. "Back to the Future," apart from being funny, astonished with the details of 50's society it integrated into its improbable tale.

This same story is now being retold in Francis Ford Coppola's "Peggy Sue Got Married," with Kathleen Turner as the protagonist who is catapulted into her own past.

Peggy, who is about to get a divorce from her philandering, appliance peddling husband, Charlie Bodell (Nicolas Cage), is attending the 25th reunion of her high school graduating class with her daughters. Peggy is vowed the 25th reunion queen; upon accepting her crown she falls to the floor, the ring from what we assume to be an overabundance of excitement. With no electronic wizardry whatsoever, she finds herself waking up in her high school gym- nasis years earlier, having succumbed to a fainting spell while donating during the school blood drive.

Things fascinate trapped in the body of her youth but with the mind and feel- ings of a forty year old, going to the dances with the boy who will later become her hus- band, and once again ogling guys and gig- ling with her high school girlfriends. Try- ing to return to the future is the least of Peggy's worries: to be sure, she is per-plexed by her current condition but in- terested in permanently reshaping the past with "Peggy Sue".

In both films there is quite a bit of com- parison between the culture of the 50's and the culture of the 80's (the odors of Mi- chael J. Fox riding a skateboard and ask- ing for a Pepsi Free in "Back to the Fu- ture" is comparable to Peggy trying to explain ghetto blasters and microchips to the school nerd), but this is only incidental and in no way central to either film.

The differences in the films are made most clear by the fact that Michael J. Fox was transported into the past as himself, namely in his 80's incarnation, whereas Peggy travels back in time to inhabit her body as a seventeen year old whom every- body is already familiar with. This is the difference between a stranger visiting a strange land and a native returning to her home after a long journey abroad — the viewpoints are completely different.

Whereas "Back to the Future" was quite impractical, dealing mostly with the hu- morous aspects of a rather bizarre incestu- ous relationship (how far one can describe a come-on from one's own mother?), "Peggy Sue" is by far the more personal film — not unlike a diary where instead of writing what has happened each day one writes what one wished had happened.

Coppola is known for leaving plot by the wayside to develop the personalities of his characters and the relationships be- tween them, and this film is no exception. The plot of "Peggy Sue" is far from lin- ear; in the final analysis the movie is no more than several vignettes in which Peggy often finds that what she wished she had done would not have left her better off. These vignettes are strong together al- most haphazardly, sharing little continui- ty other than that they occur in chronolo- gical order. But they convey perfectly the feeling of the past: we do not always re- member the exact succession of events that lead up to some climax but simply those events that stand out most in our minds.

If "Peggy Sue" is different and interest- ing because of its approach, one must also point out that it suffers from three major flaws. Firstly, although the vignettes con- vey a guilty yet exciting, voyeuristic sense of peering into someone else's past, they often leave the audience uncomfortable with what is being viewed. Many of the scenes, because they seem to have been so haphazardly incorporated into the plot, are just out of place. As an example, the relationship developed between Peggy and the school nerd is on such shaky ground that his proposal of marriage seems to come out of the blue.

Secondly, Peggy's character as a fortyish woman inhabiting a seventeen year old body is inadequately developed. Peggy al- terates like a yo-yo between knowledge- able woman and immature teenager at such a frightening pace that the basic premise of her retaining her adult emo- tions is at best questionable.

Lastly, in the trailers and ads on televisi- on "Peggy Sue" is being pitched as a belly-aching comedy. Apparently the dis- tributors are banking on the fact that if this film is sold as the "Back to the Fu- ture" comedy of 1986 — although it is nothing of the sort — it will do well at the box office.

"Peggy Sue," although it in no way lives up to its promotion as the big comedy of the fall season, does live up to expecta- tions as a reasonably good film with a differ- ent slant on time travel. As an explora- tion of personal dreams and wishes, it reveals that what we are is often the best of what we could possibly have been.