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A Look at the Loony Bin

Milos Forman’s film is not one to miss. The dreary, honest shots take the audience through a 1960s mental ward superfluous with interesting characters and unforgettable antics. Adapted from Ken Kesey’s novel by the same name, One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest is comedic and unsettling in a way that forces audiences to pay attention to the brutal truth: we conform to keep our comfort.

The movie opens with our main character, McMurphy, entering the mental ward in handcuffs. Though this differs from the novel, which primarily focuses on the janitor Chief, the film follows McMurphy as he integrates into the hospital’s routine. McMurphy—a belligerent, charismatic criminal—decides to change things up in the ward and cause a ruckus. This chaotic behavior allows for plenty of hilarious antics to ensue, as well as creating a community between the patients that never existed prior to McMurphy entering. It also shows the true evil that can prosper when one has unlimited power, as shown by Nurse Ratched’s strict orders and powerful control over the patients. McMurphy comes to screw all that up and it is executed incredibly.

Though the story is excellent alone, the actors truly bring the characters and emotions to life. McMurphy is perfectly portrayed by Jack Nicholson, who unflinchingly allows for his crazy, vulgar side to shine in this role. Will Sampson embodies Chief in an unprecedented way, both in size and personality. And we cannot forget how well Louise Fletcher portrays Nurse Ratched’s cold, cunning disposition. The casting choices were brilliant and it gave the film a tangible realness to all the characters.

Forman made many filming choices that helped shape the overall tone of this movie. He kept the lighting quite dull, so as to emphasize the vapid nature of the ward, and many shots would linger on the character’s faces to fully allow the emotions and motives to be revealed. Eye level shots would stay focused on Nurse Ratched to emphasize her cold composure, while some would remain to lengthen a situation, like when McMurphy was beginning to doze off at the party.

Not only were the shots carefully executed, but so was the script, set design, and costumes. Forman made sure that McMurphy remained as vulgar and crude as he was in the novel. This vernacular shows the audience that he is more rebellious and course, which clashes with Nurse Ratched’s dialogue—cold, calculated, clinical, and devoid of curses. Harding—the scholar of the group—uses highfalutin vocabulary to show everyone how smart he is, while Billy stutters every time he talks. The colloquial of the characters gives us more insight into their personalities and characterization, as does their costumes. McMurphy usually sports a dark beanie with a green shirt, even when he is required to wear the white uniforms that most of the other patients wear. This illustrates that he is completely rebellious, even when it comes to his clothes. Nurse Ratched dons a cap that crowns her weird hairstyle, which is unmistakably shaped like two devil horns on her head. Her all white outfit fits the image she tries to portray about the hospital: it’s pure. When her cap is dirtied in the latter scenes of the movie, audiences realize that this symbolizes her “angelic, pure” image being shattered, screwed over by McMurphy.

The final shots of the movie evoke unexpected emotion from viewers. As Chief smothers McMurphy’s gaping mouth with a pillow, a sense of melancholy rolls over. We believe that the rebellion that McMurphy sparked has been defeated by Nurse Ratched’s power as he is mercifully killed by Chief. Yet, both Kesey and Forman show us that McMurphy’s death became Chief’s strength as he was able to rebuild his confidence throughout the film (with McMurphy’s guidance) and find the courage to escape the draining comfort of the hospital. He breaks free and the final shot shows him running through a field, the same shot that was empty at the beginning of the movie. The native music playing in the background ties in the sorrowful, yet hopeful tone of the film and reminds us that in order to truly be free, we must be brave enough to run from the conformity that tries to smother us.

Milo Forman’s film is an excellent book-to-movie adaptation that is both a hilarious and unflinchingly honest look at the corruption behind mental wards, the struggles of feeling comfort in conformity, and the bravery that one must exhibit to break free. As the patients come to terms with this, so too, do the audiences.