



STOP MAKING SENSE

Director: Jonathan Demme

Initially, I thought there would be two ways of approaching *Stop Making Sense* — either as a record of a Talking Heads concert or as a Jonathan Demme film. That the two are inseparable is evidence of the movie's achievement.

The film itself seems to take on the character of one of David Byrne's songs. From the moment when Pablo Ferro's nervously elegant titles fill the screen, one senses that all excess has been pared away. Style has been wrought from the barest essentials. It is an aesthetic that can be traced through in some of Byrne's treatments of his own songs: 'Heaven' from *Fear Of Music* features only Byrne and Tina Weymouth with the rather eerie assistance of two offstage vocalists. Demme then complements the laid-back ambience of the songs with lingering, slow dissolves between the performers.

We are told very definitely in the credits that the staging has been conceived by Byrne and it is certainly mounted with knife-edge



precision. It takes six numbers to get the whole band on stage: Byrne introduces 'Psycho Killer' as a nervy solo and gradually, song by song, the band join him with all nine musicians eventually launching into a blistering version of 'Burning Down the House'. Demme uses this slow build-up to achieve some brilliant cinema, whether it be the 180 degree pan around drummer Chris Frantz in his number or the effective side shots and long shots in 'Slippery People'.

The concert was recorded in Hollywood Pantages Theatre over four evenings and Demme incorporates the reality of the theatrical presentation into his film. Jordan Cronenworth's camera lets us both see the wings as well as see the view across the stage as if we were participating in the performance. Roadies in black move on and off like mysterious figures from Kabuki theatre.

'Making Flippy Floppy' is the first song to make use of back-projected slides. A giant triptych behind the group throws out words which seem to catch slices of the contemporary American ethos (FACELIFT/PIG/STARWARS was my favourite combination) and yet Demme is not afraid to ignore some of these cultural surtitles in his concentrating on the musicians. At other times he can be the soul of discretion: the film-

ing of 'This Must Be the Place', with the band compactly arranged around the domestic prop of a standard lamp, is as restrained as the original video for the song had been.

In the final count, what makes *Stop Making Sense* such an exhilarating experience is Demme's evident sympathy for these performers. One of the most irresistible touches is the way in which he catches the delightful interaction between Byrne and the diminutive Weymouth, looking amazingly like a Stateside Sue Donaldson.

It was 1976 when Martin Scorsese caught the magic of the Band's final concert in *The Last Waltz* and I've been a long time waiting to find a rock film that is as satisfying musically as it is cinematically. *Stop Making Sense* is such a film. That is no mean achievement.

TESTAMENT

Director: Lynne Littman

Testament has made it rather belatedly to our cinemas, too late, alas, to use Jane Alexander's 1984 Oscar nomination for publicity. It is a harrowing film, yet its low-key and restrained approach to the subject of nuclear holocaust is a healthy corrective to the melodramatics and sheer silliness of last year's *The Day After*.

In *Testament*, the small Californian town of Hamlin has survived the direct impact of a nuclear attack that has devastated the rest of the country. The film shows us, with chilling inevitability, the extinction of the town's populace.

Some of the strongest anti-nuclear protest has come from women — one remembers the Greenham Common demonstration or Auckland's indefatigable Pramathon participants — and *Testament* is very much a woman's view of this horrific subject. One cannot but admire how it avoids both the graphically violent and the sentimental and yet manages to be both horrific and immensely moving. *Testament* is a thought-provoking and compelling film that one hopes will be seen by a larger audience than the small number who went to the short Auckland season.

COUNTRY

Director: Richard Pearce

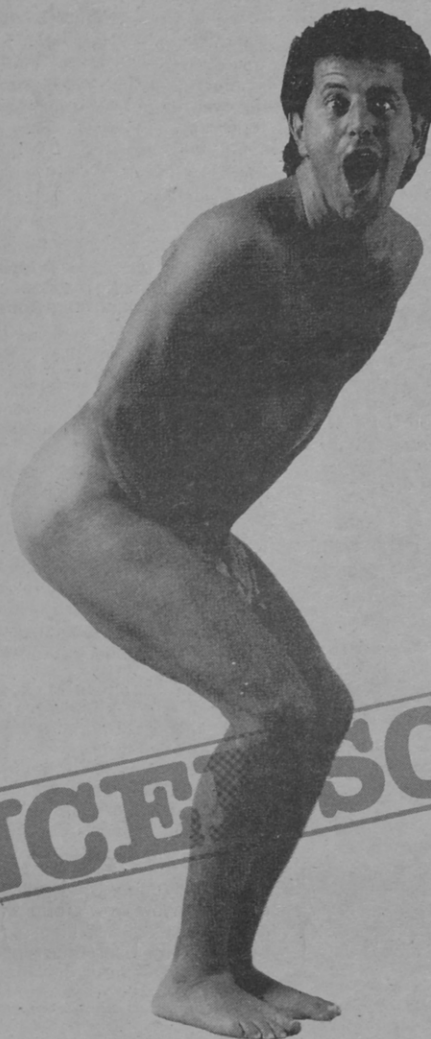
Pearce's new film describes the struggle of the poor farmers in present-day Dakota and their struggle against the faceless power of an unsympathetic government. *Country* takes as its theme the same conflict that inspired Woody Guthrie to write so many poignant songs in the late 30s and 40s. It is a good deal less effective than Guthrie, because it lacks his essential simplicity and directness.

Some of the problems lie with casting. For my money, Jessica Lange, however sincere she may be in her politics and skillful in her acting, she just doesn't convince as a pancake-dispensing, hair-curler-bedecked mother over a farm breakfast table. Even Sam Shepard lacks that dimension of credibility that is so necessary for that type of film.

Country deals with a social conditions of present-day America that has grown out of the retrenchment policies of the Reagan government. However worthy it be in its intentions, it simply lies struggling under the weight of the studio production and presentation around it. After all ... Woody Guthrie just wrote three-chord songs and played his guitar.

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