The Good Fight

It was always wartime for Sam Fuller

BY SCOTT EYMAN

Film Is Like a Battleground: Sam Fuller's War Movies
By Marsha Gordon, Oxford University Press, $29.95

I WAS ON TIME FOR MY 8 P.M. APPOINTMENT WITH SAM FULLER. I staggered out of his house the next morning just as the sun was peeking over the Los Angeles hills. I had asked perhaps 25 questions during the 10-hour marathon that was our interview, shortly after the release of *White Dog* in 1982.

Many directors are forces of nature, but Fuller was a special case. A small man who was never without his cigar (did he ever meet Lubitsch?), he was one of the most endearing rogue mutts ever to forge an independent career in Hollywood. Except for the years with Darryl Zanuck, he was an archetypal lone wolf.

Marsha Gordon's book on Fuller is part biography, part critical analysis, and it's eminently worth reading on both counts. Primarily she's engaged in making connections between Fuller's years with The Big Red One (aka the 1st Infantry Division) during World War II—the seminal experience of his life—and his filmmaking career.

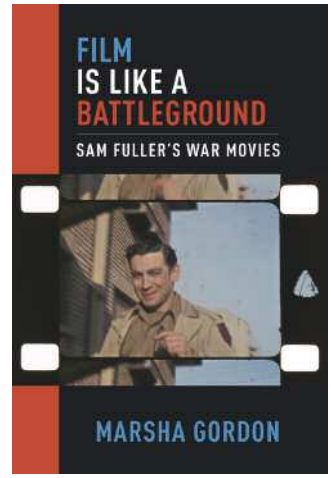
Technically, Fuller made only five war films, but Gordon correctly states that "even when guns are not being fired in a Fuller film—and they almost always are—war permeates his cinematic universe." That's because Fuller saw all of life as combat, armed or otherwise, so Gordon includes movies that are not, strictly speaking, about war: *Pickup on South Street* and *Run of the Arrow*.

Gordon emerges with some stunning information. For instance: Fuller was not, as he always claimed, born in 1912 in Worcester, Massachusetts, but in Russia in 1911. His name at birth was Michal Filler, and he didn't emigrate to Worcester until 1913, when he was one and a half. Fuller's determination to claim native status invites speculation, but there are no firm answers.

By all odds the most fascinating sections of the book concern Fuller's 16mm home movies of the war. Fuller helped liberate a concentration camp at Falkenau, Czechoslovakia, and Gordon describes his documentation of the event in painstaking detail. Cumulatively, the 16mm films form a direct counterpoint to George Stevens's movies of the war.

One of the 16mm reels Gordon describes is a Fuller movie in miniature about the 1st Division attempting to bestow a degree of dignity on Falkenau's dead. Local townspeople were forced to come to the concentration camp by the company commander under threat of a firing squad. Corpses had been stacked like cordwood, but the commander ordered the townspeople to dress the corpses and lay them out on white sheets for burial. Fuller takes care to show the proximity of the town to the camp—a few hundred yards.

Other scenes are more fragmentary, snapshots of war's brutal equivalence and rough allegiances. The frame grabs Gordon reproduces from the home movies are vivid, and so are the excerpts from Fuller's letters: "Men are only interested in three things after they touchdown in an invasion," he wrote Lewis Milestone in June 1945. "Relief, relief, relief. After they bitch about wanting to get the hell off the beach once they make it, they get the sand out of their shoes; they worry about wet toilet paper, wet weapons, wet ammunition."



Gordon's book leaves no

THE STEEL HELMET: LIPPERT/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

Steven Spielberg: A Life in Films
by Molly Haskell
Yale University Press, $25

Molly Haskell's preface to her lucid, fleet-footed *Steven Spielberg: A Life in Films* speaks to the split that has long defined the serious critical response to the most successful Hollywood filmmaker of all time. Earlier generations of critics who were there to witness his ascendance in the '70s and '80s saw his crowd-pleasing brand of blockbuster as a betrayal of the emotionally complicated New Hollywood ethos—a definitive turn toward a more conservative form of mass appeal entertainment, solidified once and for all by the stratospheric culture-leveling of *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*. Then there are the younger generations who came of age with Spielberg, taking his position as unparalleled hitmaker as a given, and therefore more ready to accept his

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doubt that the war was the making of Fuller as an artist and he knew it while it was still happening; he started making notes for *The Steel Helmet* as early as August 1943. Comic relief comes in a hilarious section documenting Fuller's political troubles around the time of *The Steel Helmet* (1951). *The Daily Worker* was convinced that he had fascist leanings, while the House Un-American Activities committee thought he just might be a Communist.

Fuller's work, whether as a novelist or director, is all about visceral experience. His films avoid the foundational aspects of any of the conflicts he portrays. He simply follows people trapped in the maelstrom, and observes how their choices—or blind luck—funnel them toward life or death. ●

Scott Eyman has written 13 books about the movies, including *John Wayne: The Life and Legend*. He teaches film history at the University of Miami.

Canadian Hustle

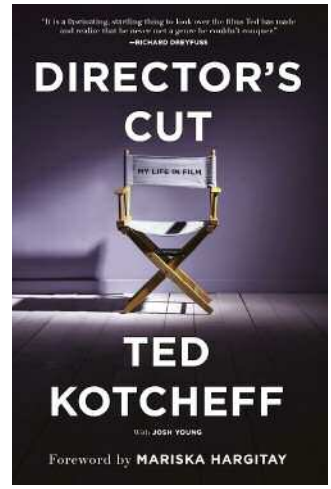
A jocular journeyman holds court

BY NICK PINKERTON

Director's Cut: My Life in Film
By Ted Kotcheff, ECW Press, $29.95

I DEVELOPED AN EXTRAORDINARY RELATIONSHIP WITH THE kangaroos that is hard to explain. I hope you won't think that I'm delusionary when I say I could communicate with them telepathically." It is for such insights into the director's craft that Ted Kotcheff's digressive, sometimes salty *Director's Cut: My Life in Film* is a book to be valued. The above mind-meld occurred during the Outback location shoot of *Wake in Fright* (1971), a squalid bender of a movie revived to great acclaim a few years back, and now ranks among the handful of films for which 85-year-old Canadian-born Kotcheff is best known, along with *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1974), *First Blood* (1982), *Weekend at Bernie's* (1989) and, my personal favorite, the Nick Nolte–starring NFL exposé *North Dallas Forty* (1979).

That motley sampling of titles doesn't offer a clear portrait of Ted Kotcheff, auteur—though *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, an adaptation of Mordecai Richler's 1959 novel of the same name starring Richard Dreyfuss as a young Jewish kid hustling to make his way out of the slums of Montreal, is perhaps the film that comes closest. Richler was a countryman and a



close friend of the author, and as émigrés in London they shared a flat in Swiss Cottage while the novel was being written and Kotcheff was translating his experience on the early live television broadcasts of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation into a career directing for stage and screen. The success of *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* finally purchased his ticket to Hollywood.

The London chapters are among the book's most animated sections, along with those about Kotcheff's early life as the son of Bulgarian-Macedonian immigrants in Toronto's Cabbagetown during the years of the Great Depression, in which he describes the brutal beatings that he received from his father, a catalogue of pre-adolescent sexual experiences, and the cultural ferment among the leftist Slav population. Kotcheff's eventual choice of London over Hollywood was made for him, barred from entry to the United States at length as a suspected Communist, leading to a disgust for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police that is among his book's pet themes: "They not only dropped their trousers and bent over," he writes, "they put Vaseline on their posteriors to make it easier for the Yanks to bone them."

The prose doesn't always soar to such heights. Kotcheff aspired to be a poet early on, and the excerpts from his work that are peppered through the book validate his eventual choice of vocation. He has a tendency to end almost every chapter on a note of enthusiasm, which grows monotonous, and to put dialogue into the mouths of the book's dramatis personae that is impossible to imagine being spoken aloud ("Don't be up to your slimy producorial tricks and lie to me so brazenly"). Such faults are counterbalanced by a bounty of no-nonsense homiletics on the duty of the director and regular injections of salacious gossip: David Niven spinning a yarn about being unexpectedly urinated on by Joan Crawford before setting out on a studio-assigned date, or Oakland Raiders defensive end and *North Dallas Forty* actor John Matuszak being identified as living "with a mother and her adult daughter in an apparent ménage à trois relationship." It is a book that puts on no airs—as befits a Cabbagetown boy made good. ●

journey to establish himself as a serious artist and more willing to acknowledge his astonishing craft, which has become ever more impossible to ignore as classical Hollywood filmmaking slowly disappears.

As she hails from the former category of critic, Haskell writes that "brooding ambiguities, unresolved longings, things left unsaid, and the erotic transactions of men and women are the very things that drew me to movies in the first place." Not Spielberg territory, it goes without saying. Furthermore, Haskell's no baby boomer and surely no boy. Therefore in taking the assignment for Yale's Jewish Lives series, gentile Haskell forces herself to realign and reassess. The result is a culturally specific yet idiosyncratic monograph that functions simultaneously as a work of biography, feminist criticism, and self-critique. Unsurprisingly, Haskell is surpassingly eloquent on her favorites (*Empire of the Sun*, *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*), though her cautious, balanced defenses of *The Color Purple*, *Amistad*, and *Munich* are particularly insightful, reminding us that pigeonholing a career so varied and ambitious is a fool's errand.
—Michael Koresky