

# Entertainment Outlook

## New, improved suspect words

### THE BARRIS BEAT

By Alex Barris  
Two words I tend to suspect, especially when they are placed together, are "new" and "improved." Television commercials are always telling us about some irresistible product that is either new or improved — usually both.

Perhaps it's a sign of advancing age, but I long ago gave up equating newness with improvement. I'm probably guilty of being a conservationist — though not necessarily a conservative.

But they're at it again, the "they"

The reason for all this is that they have convinced themselves that young movie-goers will not bother with black-and-white movies but will be more likely to go see them (or stay

## Barris Beat

In this case being the eager pitchmen who would have us believe they have found a way of "improving" old movies. The method, we are told, is simply a matter of adding color to old black-and-white movies, thus making them "new."

home and watch them) if the movies are tinted. I don't know if that's true, but I am reasonably sure that the result — apart from potential box office receipts — has nothing to do with improvement.

It's true, of course, that black-and-white films were made that way because a method of reproducing color on film had not yet been perfected. There were some color films, or films with color sequences in them, as early as the start of the 1930s, but the quality was erratic and the cost was prohibitive for another decade.

No one would deny that some (perhaps many) movies were considerably enhanced by the use of color film. A few that come to mind — and anyone can substitute his or her own preferences — are *Gone With The Wind*, *The Wizard Of Oz*, *Dr. Zhivago*, *Lawrence Of Arabia*, *Moulin Rouge*, *An American In Paris*, *Lust For Life*, *Singin' In The Rain* and *Gandhi*.

On the other hand, one can think of some rather costly flops (which deserved to flop) that were made in color, but the use of color didn't help them one bit. Again, only a random list, but here goes: *Star*, *Hello Dolly*, *Mame*, *Cleopatra*, *Dr. Dooblittle*, *Heaven's Gate*, *Cotton Club* and *Pennies From Heaven*.

I don't suggest for a moment that those films would have been better in black and white. They were simply bad, and whether you shot them in color, black and white or polka dots, that wouldn't have helped them.

But, then, there are certain black-and-white films that are classics in one way or another, and I have no wish to see them "colorized" as a marketing gimmick.

This list, too, is subjective. You can substitute your own favorites, but here are some of my favorite black-and-white films that I'd like left alone, thank you.

*Citizen Kane*, *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Grapes Of Wrath*, *Dr. Strangelove*, *Paths Of Glory*, *Casablanca*, *Brief Encounter*, *The Last Picture Show*, *Twelve Angry Men*, *High Noon*, *Fall Safe*, *Manhattan*, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, *The Big Sleep*, *Red River* and *Key Largo*.

You'll notice that at least some of these were made well after the use of color had become the norm: *The Last Picture Show* was made in 1971; *Manhattan* in 1979; *Dr. Strangelove* in 1964. The directors of those films may possibly have made them in black and white to save money; but that didn't prevent them from making superior films.

The proponents of "colorization" argue that the addition of color will make the films more "real" and, thus, better. That's at least debatable.

Masterful film makers like John Huston and Howard Hawks knew what they were doing when they shot in black and white. To begin with, the term "black and white" is misleading. There are infinite shades of grey



Some cast members of Acton High School's production of "Preppies" take a break during rehearsal. "Preppies" will be staged on May 7, 8 and 9 at AHS, the first time the play will be performed by any high school. Shown, here are: (1st row) Pat Reynolds; (2nd row) Stacey Hillier (left) and Helen Knowles; (3rd row) Jennifer Pearce (left) and Mary Moore. (Photo by Mary-Liz Shaw)

### Prepped up

between those two extremes, and many gifted directors — aided by sensitive cinematographers and alert lighting directors — had a feel for creating a spectrum of moods and atmospheres that resulted in memorable films that did not suffer one whit from the absence of color.

Huston knew how to work with color, as he did superbly in *Moulin Rouge* and *The African Queen*. But his black-and-white films (including *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Treasure Of The Sierra Madre* and *The Asphalt Jungle*) are equally memorable. Stanley Kubrick used color to good purpose in *Barry Lyndon* and *The Clockwork Orange*, but its absence in *Dr. Strangelove* and *Paths Of Glory* in no way diminished those outstanding films. Many Woody Allen films were done in color, but black and white suited *Manhattan*.

Any seasoned movie fan can come up with some examples of films that were actually better in black and white than they would have been in color. One that comes to mind is *King's Row*, that murky, moody 1942 Sam Wood film, whose undercurrent of sinister goings-on was admirably

served by the gloomy shadings of black-and-white cinematography. The same point can be made about *Gilda*, *Dead Of Night*, *All That Money Can Buy*, *Gaslight*, *The Letter*, *Sunset Boulevard*, *Sorry, Wrong Number* and *Five Fingers*.

It's interesting that a number of films, made first in black and white, were subsequently remade in color, rarely with happy results. John Ford's 1939 western classic, *Stagecoach*, was made sans color; its 1968 remake, in color, was a disaster. The 1982 *Scarface* (with Al Pacino) was a fiasco in color. Other black-and-white films later remade in color include *The 39 Steps*, *The Lady Vanishes*, *Magnificent Obsession*, *Beau Geste*, *My Man Godfrey* and *To Be Or Not To Be*. None of the remakes measured up to the color-free originals.

To drive home the point, Leo McCarey directed *Love Affair*, with Irene Dunne and Charles Boyer, in 1939, in black and white. The same director remade it (as *An Affair To Remember*) in 1957, in color. It wasn't as good. And Frank Capra made *Lady For A Day* in 1933 in monochrome. The same Capra made it again in 1961, in color, as *A Pocketful Of Miracles*, and it didn't measure up to the original.

It was the colorization of another Capra film, *It's A Wonderful Life*, that started all this nonsense. Capra was against it, but even the fact that he produced and directed it gave him no more influence in stopping this "improvement" than would my lonely vote.

I saw *It's A Wonderful Life* again, in black and white, just before Christmas. It's a warm, sentimental fantasy, especially appropriate for Christmas, and the absence of color didn't detract from its engaging story and performances.

More recently, I saw *The Maltese Falcon* in "colorization." The colors didn't blur (as has been reported with earlier attempts) but they were soft, pastel, washed-out.

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