

At the Movies

Judy Klemesrud

How 'Melvin and Howard' was released.



The New York Times/Edward Hausner

Jonathan Demme: "I don't believe in the art-house stigma."

but it's not really a comedy.' Another wrote, 'It's a nice movie, but I don't understand why it was made.'

Mr. Demme, who looked like a teenager in his ancient Mickey Mouse ski sweater, faded blue jeans and saddle shoes, recalled that his first will-it-or-won't-it-open adventure occurred in 1977. That was when his "Handle With Care," originally titled "Citizen's Band," got good reviews at the Film Festival — just as "Melvin and Howard" did — after failing in the marketplace during a brief tryout five months earlier. Paramount reluctantly reopened "Handle With Care" in New York a few days after the festival, and even tried a free-admission policy, but again the film failed to do business.

"But it had marvelous long engagements in Boston and Washington," Mr. Demme said.

So how did "Melvin and Howard" get chosen to open this year's festival after having been drubbed by the exhibitors? "I had a screening for several of my friends," the director said, "and someone told someone at the festival committee that they had seen 'Melvin and Howard' and had loved it. So the festival people called Universal and asked if they could see it. Did you know that it was the first film that Universal ever allowed the festival to show? There's a notion in the industry that a movie can be labeled 'highbrow' if it's shown at the festival. It's known as 'the art-house stigma.'"

"I don't believe in the art-house stigma," Mr. Demme said with a smile.

Mr. Demme, who grew up in Rockville Centre, L.I., is a former movie press agent who made his directorial debut in 1975 with "Caged Heat," followed by "Crazy Mama" and "Fighting Mad," a trio of violent exploitation quickies that he churned out for Roger Corman.

He said he was asked to direct "Melvin and Howard" in 1978 by Thom Mount, executive vice president in charge of production for Universal, after Mike Nichols had bowed out of the project.

"Talk about something dropping from heaven into your hands," he said. "Bo Goldman had written just such a

wonderful screenplay. I called Thom back the next day and said, 'Yes, please.'"

He said he immediately thought of Paul Le Mat, who had also starred in "Handle With Care," for the main role of Melvin Dummar. "Paul is legendary around Los Angeles for turning everything down," he said. "It's important to him that his movies have very, very high standards and not contain violence. Well, Paul called me the same day he got the script, when he was on page 30, and said, 'I'll do it.'"

Jason Robards, on the other hand, was not Mr. Demme's first choice for the part of Hughes. "My first thought was that we needed to have an actor who was not so well known, and sort of mysterious, like Roberts Blossom, who played Paul's father in 'Handle With Care.' But the studio had a strong reaction to my casting a relative unknown in the part. They wanted an actor of recognized muscle to do it."

While shooting the \$7.5 million film in Utah and Nevada, Mr. Demme said that he deliberately tried to avoid spending time with the real Mr. Dummar, who had a small role as the countererman in the Reno bus station. "I was afraid of spending time with Melvin," he said. "Bo's script had created such a vivid impression that I thought: 'What if I don't like him? What if I don't believe him? What if I don't trust him?'"

"Then, after all my trepidations about meeting him, he came waltzing into our production office one day and swept me off my feet. He'd come driving by in his Coors beer truck."

"Love," a new feature film for which nine prominent women each wrote short stories offering their personal visions of That Thing Called Love, is being filmed in Toronto.

The nine contributors are Liv Ullmann, the actress; Germaine Greer, the feminist author; Joni Mitchell, the singer; Lady Antonia Fraser, the author; Mai Zetterling, the director; Edna O'Brien, the author; Penelope Gilliatt, the writer and film critic; Gael Greene, the food critic and author, and Nancy Dowd, the screenwriter.

The "Love" stories range from Lady Fraser's light fable about an au pair girl named Karina who schemes to keep the man she loves from marrying someone else on his wedding day, to Miss Zetterling's story about mutual passion between a mother and son.

Misses O'Brien and Mitchell wrote about women rejected by their lovers, and Misses Gilliatt and Ullmann wrote about the deep love that exists between an elderly couple.

Miss Greer's story focuses on a 10-year-old Australian girl as she moves from innocence to experience in the 1930's, Miss Greene's examines a style-obsessed couple who partake of sexual "swinging," and Miss Dowd's is about a cheerful, unsophisticated young woman who offers herself to a disillusioned returning World War II veteran.

Four of the women will also direct "Love" stories. Miss Zetterling will do two of them — hers and Miss Mitchell's — and Misses Dowd and Ullmann will direct their own stories. The remaining five stories will be directed by Annette Cohen, a Canadian film maker.

"The movie runs the spectrum from quite heavy drama to bizarre hilarity," Renee Perlmutter, its producer, said from Toronto. "It's mainly about how people try to touch each other and sometimes miss." "Love" is a Barry Levinson-Velvet film.

Eve Arden has been signed for a co-starring role opposite Chevy Chase and Carrie Fisher in Orion's "Under the Rainbow," in production in Los Angeles. Miss Arden will play the near-sighted Duchess of Luchow in the film, a comedy set in Hollywood during the 1930's. The director is Steve Rash, who did "The Buddy Holly Story."