Run, Bonnie and Clyde

By BOSLEY CROWTHER

UITE as puzzling to me as the production of feelings of empathy and sorrow for a couple of slap-happy killers in the new picture, "Bonnie and Clyde," is the upsurge of passionate expressions of admiration and defense of the film on the order of those from letter-writers that we published in this section last week.

Evidently there are people, including some critics, who feel that this deliberately buffoonized picture of the notorious criminal careers of Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker back in the early 1930's achieves some sort of meaningful statement for the times in which we live: something about the confusion of a couple of dumb, thrill-seeking kids who take to armed robbery for a living and are struck by resentment, not remorse, when the consequence of their depredations catches up with them.

I gather that what most of these people feel the picture conveys is a sense of the pathos of youngsters who don't really know what violence is until they are suddenly plunged into it-who recklessly play with fire without a care or a thought of what they're doing until they're fatally burned. The moral would be that violence is an abstract and unconsidered thing in the minds of most careless, flagrant rebels. When it becomes concrete, it's too late. This might be a respectable reading of the picture, if it actually did what I gather its ardent proponents seem to be confident it does -that is, give a fair conception of the sort of persons its principal characters were and a creditable exposition of the disorder of the late Depression years during which Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker ran wild through the southwest. But this, I assure you, it doesn't. The performance that Warren Beatty gives of a light-hearted, show-offish fellow with a talent for stealing cars and holding up banks

at gunpoint is mannered playacting of a hick that bears no more resemblance to Barrow than it does to Jesse James. And the sweet prettified indication of Bonnie that Faye Dunaway conveys is a totally romantic exoneration of that ugly and vicious little dame. Likewise, the scattering of poor people in Texas and thereabouts that Arthur Penn has put forth as grateful recipients of the beneficences of Bonnie and Clyde-including a gauzy, grey-haired image of Bonnie's disapproving old Maw ---- is a skillful but loaded collection of stereotypes of poverty.

You don't have to take my word for it. This is what a well-acquainted writer for this paper said on the morning after the arrogant desperadoes were killed by lawmen in a planted ambuscade:

"Clyde Barrow was 2 snake-eyed murderer who killed without giving his victims a chance to draw. He was slight, altogether unheroic in physical appearance. Bonnie Parker was a fit companion for him. She was a hard-faced, sharpmouthed woman who gave up a waitress job in a Kansas City restaurant to become the mistress of Ray Hamilton, Texas bank robber. Barrow took her away from Hamilton." And another experienced crime reporter for the New York Daily News described them as two of this country's "most ruthless and kill-crazy outlaws." Said he: "Not even the more publicized (John) Dillinger and Pretty Boy Floyd, that other veteran terrorist of the southwest, can match the bloody careers of Barrow and his flaming red-haired girl-friend. Dillinger and Floyd, by an occasional act of kindness, have attracted to themselves a certain Robin Hood aura. But Barrow and his desperadoes were bad men through and through. 'A pair of human rats with no more decent traits than any rat would

have,' Southwestern peace officers called Barrow and Bonnie, and a glance at their records is enough to prove they deserved the indictment."

Their records, incidentally, are suggested with utterly cavalier distortions all the way through the film. Barrow had run a lengthy and sordid career of crime before he ever met Bonnie, which is inaccurately described Ъν having Barrow first see her nude at a window in her mama's house for the opening of the film. The only historical model for the grinning dirt-kicking bumpkin that the script drags in to be their devoted companion in their subsequent robberies and getaways is Clyde's former partner, Ray Hamilton, and he was a sniveling punk who, among other things, joined Clyde in killing a sheriff and wounding his deputy just for ordering them not to drink at a dance hall in Atoka, Okle.

Lastly, there is no substantial evidence for the assumption the scriptwriters make that Barrow was impotent with Bonnie, and that the climax of their relationship was when Bonnie wrote a doggrel poem about him which so pleased and exalted him, when it was printed in a Texas newspaper, that he was able to make it with her successfully before they were killed. This is an indication of the kind of cheating with the bare and ugly truth that Mr. Penn, his writers and Mr. Beatty have done in this garish, grotesque film that makes the crimes of Clyde and Bonnie quite hilarious until the two suddenly are confronted with the grisly slaughter of Clyde's tag-along brother in a blazing shootout with the police. After this the film gets very solemn. Clyde and Bonnie are strangely subdued. They make love. Then they are stealthily hunted and finally gunned down in a shattering fire by the police. No matter how much one Continued on Page 10

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reacts to the very skillful fabrication of this film and wants to see something valid in it-a kind of plaintive folk ballad, at least (which is clearly encouraged by the use of rollicking mountain music in the score)-it still is a grossly romantic, sentimental and arbitrary setting up of a collision of comedy and violence, which spews noise and sparks but not much truth. And no matter how much one discovers later that its killers are a bit distorted and absurd, it has built up its sympathy for them. They are not enemies of society. Society is the enemy of them.

Perhaps this is why this picture is getting a favorable response among some compassionate viewers. Society is the antagonist. The Establishment, or the breakdown of it, is responsible for all the woes—for the banks that foreclose on poor farmers, for the greedy store-keepers who don't want to be robbed, for the nasty police, for the illusions and delusions of grandeur of Bonnie and Clyde.

This is certainly a complex thesis to support on evidence as unsubstantial and disreput



"GERVAISE"—Maria Schell looks to Suzy Delair for guidance in Rene Clement's French film based on Zola's novel, "L'Assomoir." It will be revived at the Thalia, Friday.

able as the careers of a couple of fanciful crooks. By this same line of reckoning, one could build up a theme of sympathy and sadness on the thought that the system was the enemy of a character named Lee Harvey Oswald who had a penchant to fire high-powered rifles at moving targets, or that the irony of Hitler's terror was that he was so confused by his early rejection that he didn't realize the awfulness of the violence he caused.

I am sorry to say that "Bonnie and Clyde" does not impress me as a contribution to the thinking of our times or as wholesome entertainment.