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### DVD REVIEW: 'TONY PALMER'S 1973 FILM ABOUT HUGH HEFNER'

Posted by: Wesley Britton October 21, 2014  
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From the 1960s through the 1980s, British director and producer Tony Palmer profiled a number of culturally important luminaries, mostly in the arts. He worked with the likes of Benjamin Britten, Cream, Fairport Convention, Frank Zappa, and Igor Stravinsky. He helmed a series of "The World of" TV documentaries on Peter Sellers, Liberace, Miss World, and Hugh Hefner.

Now, MVD Entertainment Group has issued Palmer's 1973 *The World of Hugh Hefner* and given it the rather, ah, hefty title of *Tony Palmer's 1973 Film About Hugh Hefner, The Founder and Editor of Playboy*. That's quite a mouthful for a 53 minute film. Presumably MVD needed a title that would distinguish this hour from all the other film biographies on Hefner that have proliferated over the years.

Back in 1973, the apparent reason for Palmer's invitation to go behind the scenes with Hefner was the publisher's obvious desire to tell his own story. As he tells us in one of the many interview segments, Hefner claimed most of the articles written about him had less to do with him as a person or the impact of *Playboy* but rather the biases and preconceptions of the writers. So Hef gave Palmer an open door into the kaleidoscope of Hugh Hefner's opulent private world for everyone to see.

After all these years, of course, there's little that can be now revelatory about the pipe-smoking publisher. But there is a historical significance in seeing this snapshot of Hefner in the early '70s. We're reminded of why Hefner saw himself as a visionary with a singular mission. "The real essence of Playboy was trying to put not just sex, but the whole notion of play and pleasure, back into the American concept of Living," Hef tells us. "And that proved to be a little more revolutionary than I realized when I started."

Sure enough, there's an emphasis on "play" from the beginning of the film. We see Hefner playing pool and pinball. We see Hef showing off his toys, and what toys he had! There's his black private plane, his mansion, his pets, pool, tennis court, and gadgets. He's very clear he preferred to run his empire from home and have those who want to talk to him come to his "Disneyland for adults." After all, he had his own movie library and brought in all the new releases he wanted to see in the comfort of his private theatre. This way, he could avoid the wasted time of standing in lines, wait for tables at restaurants, or interact with people he didn't want to spend time with.

Naturally, we see some of how his empire operated from Playmate shoots to editorial conferences including how Hefner was involved in minutia such as comma placement or the color of the eyes in cartoons. Hef was interested in both girls and graphics and discusses how he began as a cartoonist, designed the Bunny logo, and what made for a good Playmate. Yes, we see many of those lovelies and hear how they felt it was an honor to be one of the few, the proud, the well-endowed figures in the centerfold twelve times a year.

One of the reasons Palmer's production was so distinctive was his use of classical music to make the show-and-tell lushly dramatic. We don't just see a moving slide show of Hefner's mansion and grounds, we hear sweeping violins and horns making it all feel very regal. When the Playmate of the Year for 1972 hears the list of her gifts for the honor, Palmer has the litany of all the products and trips echoing in our speakers as if important pronouncements are being shared. Well, serious things were going on beneath the play. Palmer and Hefner make it clear his magazine was more than girl watching, but it also contained editorial content that led to Hefner creating his Playboy Foundation which supported the causes he believed in.

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In short, *Tony Palmer's 1973 Film About Hugh Hefner* is more entertaining than you might suspect. When the themes are playfulness, conspicuous consumption, and women worthy of having staples in their navel, it's fun to see all this in colorful moving pictures. It's also fun to see Hef proudly showing off the technology that was cutting edge at the time. It's hard to see all this and not have a twinge or two of jealousy. It's also hard to believe there were many who found all this controversial.

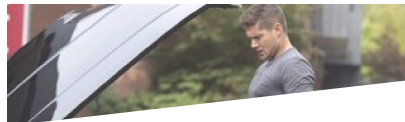
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