

# New Hollywood: American 70s

## **A New Leaf** 1971

Friday, December 11 - Wednesday, December 16, 2009



### **Film Information**

**Directed by**  
Elaine May

**Language**  
English

**Running Time**  
102 minutes

### **Film Notes**

There was a time when writer-director Elaine May seemed fated to be remembered for the fallout from her 1987 film *ISHTAR*, the response to which was so extravagantly negative that May wondered briefly if the backlash wasn't somehow orchestrated by the C.I.A. *ISHTAR* was the *WATERWORLD* of its decade, a title that transcended itself to become shorthand for budget overruns and general cinematic disaster. As May herself once joked, "If all of the people who hate *ISHTAR* had seen it, I would be a rich woman today."

Sadly, May hasn't directed a picture since. And *A NEW LEAF*, her 1971 debut, shows what kind of voice the film world lost as a result. In a 2006 interview with her long-time collaborator Mike Nichols, May, whose background was in theater, spoke of having no idea how to direct a movie when the production began, of learning technical requirements and even necessary terminology on the fly. "It was just a hair-raising experience, but I had such a strong story that it was hard to screw it up," she said. "If you have some story that you want to tell, it's almost hard to make it not work, even me."

Of all sources, May drew inspiration for *A NEW LEAF* from Hitchcock. Her initial vision (and her original,

3-hour-long cut of the film) included a murderous subplot later excised by nonplussed studio execs. "I wanted to do the first comedy in which somebody got away with murder," she explained. "I shot the murder. It exists. It was a wonderful scene."

May wasn't pleased with the final cut, putting some reviewers in the awkward position of both backing her position as the film's author and praising the version that made it into theaters. "I'm generally prejudiced in favor of the director in these disputes," wrote Roger Ebert at the time, "however, the movie in its present form is hilarious, and cockeyed, and warm."

Nichols, in his 2006 conversation with May, put it another way. "[Despite the challenges] you were still so excited about making your first movie," he said. "And we see it. It's alive."

—Casey



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“She is NOT suitable. She’s primitive, she has no spirit, no wit, no conversation, and she has to be vacuumed every time she eats.”

### **More Information**

#### **Screenplay by**

Elaine May

#### **Featuring**

Walter Matthau

Elaine May

Jack Weston

George Rose

James Coco

Doris Roberts

#### **Cinematography by**

Gayne Rescher

#### **Film Editing by**

Don Guidice

Fredric Steinkamp

#### **Original Music by**

Neal Hefti

#### **Country of Origin**

USA

“Part of the difficulty with A NEW LEAF was Walter, whom, incidentally, I came to love, would call me Mrs. Hitler among other things. I didn’t want to frighten anyone, and people would leave me saying, she’s a nice girl. What is this big thing about? She’s a nice girl, and the thing is, of course, I wasn’t a nice girl. And when they found this out, they hated me all the more. And I think that’s what really happens. It’s not that they’re women. It’s that as women they think I want to show that I’m a nice person. I’m no one to be feared. I’m not one of those women who are not nice women. And in the end, when it comes down to it, you’re just as rotten as any guy. You’ll fight just as hard to get your way. So I think the real trick is for women is they should start out tough. They don’t start out tough. They start by saying, ‘Don’t be afraid of me. I’m only a woman.’ And they’re not only women, they’re just as tough as guys. In that way I think I did have trouble. But only because I seemed so pleasant.”

—Elaine May, 2006 interview with Mike Nichols  
(Film Comment Selects)

### **Also Recommended**

The Heartbreak Kid 1972 (Directed by Elaine May)

Mikey & Nicky 1976 (Written & Directed by Elaine May)

The Birdcage 1996 (Directed by Mike Nichols; Screenplay by Elaine May)

Primary Colors 1998 (Directed by Mike Nichols; Screenplay by Elaine May)

Small Time Crooks 2000 (Directed by Woody Allen; Featuring Elaine May)