

## *Harold and Maude*



*Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill*

Directed by Hal Ashby. Produced by Colin Higgins and Charles B. Mulverhill. Screenplay by Colin Higgins. Production Design by Michael D. Haller. Cinematography by John Alonzo. Songs by Cat Stevens. Edited by William A. Sawyer & Edward Warschilka. Costumes by William Theiss. Casting by Lynn Stalmaster

Cinematic length: 91minutes. Distributed by Cinema International Corporation.  
Company: Paramount. Cinematic release: 20<sup>th</sup> December 1971 (USA)  
DVD/Blue Ray release 2012. Check for ratings. Rating 80%.

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## Cast

- Ruth Gordon as Maude
- Bud Cort as Harold
- Vivian Pickles as Harold's mother
- Cyril Cusack as Glaucus
- Charles Tyner as General Ball, Harold's uncle
- Eric Christmas as a Priest
- George Wood as the Psychiatrist
- Tom Skerritt as the Motorcycle Officer
- Judy Engles as Candy Gulf, Harold's first blind date
- Shari Summers as Edith Phern, Harold's second blind date
- Ellen Geer as Harold's last blind date
- Henry Diekoff as the Butler

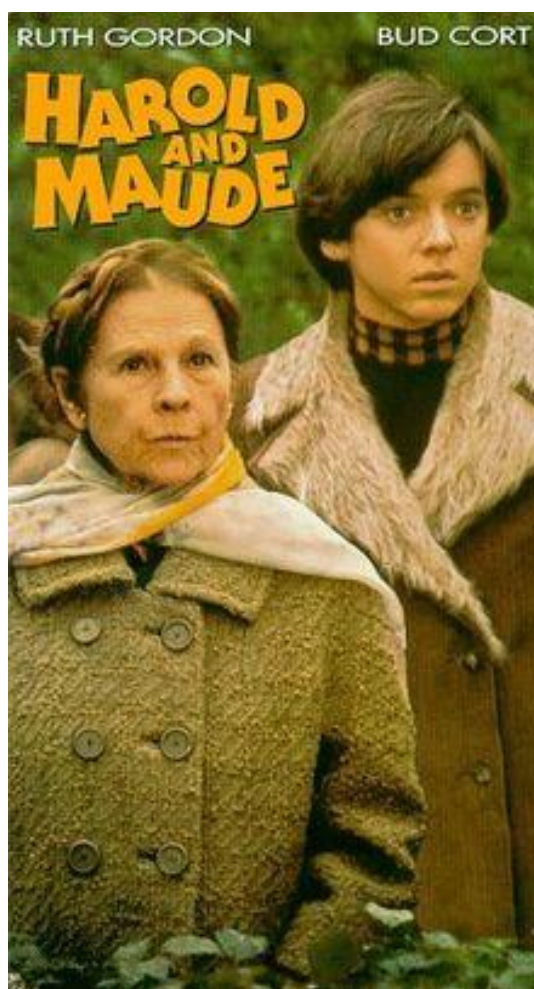
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## Review

A comedy that begins with a mother finding her teenage son hanging must surely be heading for disaster. When she ignores his dangling body it is not heading for puzzlement: it is already there - and so is the audience. Then Harold, the supposedly dead son reveals that he is alive, and has been playing a strange game. Immaculately dressed in designer clothes, a model of courtesy, his surface normality covers a fascination with all aspects of death. He uses a hearse as his car, he has a collection of weapons which are props in his numerous differently staged faked suicides. When asked by his psychiatrist what he does for fun, what gives him satisfaction, he says attending funerals. He does not joke here as he spends much of his time attending the funerals of strangers. At one such event he strikes up a friendship with Maude, a widowed

79 year old Viennese migrant and Nazi concentration camp survivor. Despite a difference of over sixty years friendship blooms into love and then a sexual relationship. Harold intends to marry her.

This summary of much of the film reads like something that even the most devoted fans of Tennessee Williams would have rejected as too sick, distasteful, impossible and morbid. It certainly could be easily played that way. Fortunately *Harold and Maude* has a whimsical, gentle ambience, many good jokes and the principals act as if the audience should laugh at the situation their characters make on the dreary, loveless, duty-bound other characters – and for much of the film we can laugh.



We eventually find why Harold is so morbid and why he is impervious to social mores. His innocence, humour and love of life stop him from becoming just a rebellious egotist. With Maude, she also loves life, without his morbidity. She attends funerals because she sees death and her life as part of the circle of life,

where everything eventually changes form, including herself. After her death she wishes to be formed into a sunflower. This shows that she also has a goodness of heart.



The film works as an inspiring comedy for several reasons, many of them fortuitous. Cat Stevens and his compositions were sudden replacements for Elton John, who did not want to be connected to the film and recommended Stevens. His music compliments the film's gentle whimsical ambience and the mood of the early 1970s, when a whole new world seemed to be opening up and the uptight, puritanical, work and duty bound world of middle America was ready for satire. Perfect casting was another tremendous advantage. Cort and Gordon were adept at embodying the whimsicality in the film without giving overreaching performances that overwhelmed the story. They knew (or director Hal Ashby knew) when to let a line or a facial expression go. Ashby also knew when to let a brief visual image tell part of the story by itself and when to bring in the long shots and the music. The contrast between Harold and Maude and then that pair contrasted with Harold's family made for comedy.

What was not so fortuitous was director Hal Ashby's sympathy for his characters, so evident in so many of his films. As in this film he often depicts them with humour and a sense that the world they inhabit has more wrong with it than them. This is typified by devotees of the system. Here we have Harold's

uncle, a nutty one armed army general who has rigged up his empty sleeve so that by pulling a cord he can salute. He tells Harold that he wishes all the Germans were not their allies but were on the other side so that they could have a proper war. America, he says hasn't had a good war since the Germans surrendered. When Harold pretends to be aroused into enthusiasm for war by such talk his uncle is at first pleased as Harold talks of the fun in shooting and bayoneting. It is only when he begins to mock strangle his uncle that the general tells him he is over excited. Other such characters abound. Harold and Maude are secretly laughing at the silly and repressive nature of the system and half the film's fun is joining in their amusement at the absurdity of trying to force repressive social mores on to these two anarchistic eccentrics.

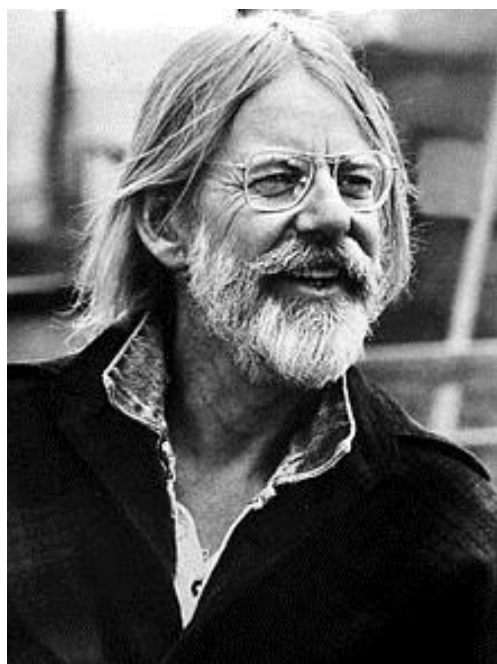
Ashby wisely knew when the film could go too far and when to have a serious moment, sometimes subtly depicted. Maude senses Harold is troubled and gives him a banjo while extolling the virtues of music, a common therapeutic practice. The sexual involvement of Harold and Maude doesn't go beyond his facial expression depicted while they are in bed with blankets up to their bare shoulders. Bringing up the Nazi horrors in a comedy seems cinematic suicide, but Ashby does this deftly and it provides a brief contrast to the comedy. Smiling and with affectionate warmth in her voice Maude recalls her happy childhood and subsequent early years of marriage in Vienna and then suddenly stops, her face becoming harrowed and tears welling up as she regretfully says the word "before" and then the camera holds a shot of her now silent, face and that says it all about what the Nazis did. Later Harold sees the concentration camp numbers tattooed on her arm, but this is in a medium shot so brief that I missed it when first seeing the film.

These references to the Nazis show that Maude and therefore humanity can overcome the worst of tragedies through a love of life. Ultimately inspired by Maude, Harold leaves his morbid fantasies behind and becomes his own man, celebrating life.

*Harold and Maude* could probably not have been made in Hollywood at any other time than late in the hippy era. When *Easy Rider* became a massive financial hit in 1969 Hollywood executives and moguls were willing to let filmmakers try nearly anything to keep the youth market and make money out of the hippy mentality, a mindset they found incomprehensible. While *Harold and Maude* had much of the gentleness, hatred of the military world, whimsicality and anarchic humour of the hippy world, it also had not only an eighty year old heroine, anathema to the youthful counter culture, but a sexual relationship between her and the young hero. To boot Harold with his jaguar

and stylish up market clothes was clearly not a hippy. Even two songs written for the film by Cat Stevens and many others from his immensely popular albums could not overcome these drawbacks. Those drawbacks seem to have wiped out the film's chances with the youth market and the film clearly had no chance with mainstream media. Apart from being a financial disaster it got several savage reviews from prominent critics and few positive ones. However a loyal cult following started upon its release and steadily grew. In the twenty-first century DVD and blue ray versions and the film's soundtrack was all released and late critics gave *Harold and Maude* appreciative reassessments. It now gains places on assorted great films listings.

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*Hal Ashby (1929-1988)*