

TKAM – Times DVD Release Review (1998)

February 27, 1998, Friday

MOVIES, PERFORMING ARTS/WEEKEND DESK

HOME VIDEO; Time Can't Kill 'Mockingbird'

By Peter M. Nichols (NY Times)

In the leanest week for new movie releases so far this year, video dealers are looking hungrily for the films that got the top Academy Award nominations earlier this month. Not much is ready. With Oscar candidates usually released in theaters late in the year, three of the five best-picture candidates – "Titanic," "Good Will Hunting" and "As Good as It Gets" – are still in movie houses and nowhere near ready for their video turns. Only "The Full Monty," to be released next week, will be available before the awards next month. The fifth nominee, "L.A. Confidential," is scheduled for release April 14.

That leaves this week with one major release. New certainly isn't the operative word for "To Kill a Mockingbird" (1962), but a 35th-anniversary edition issued by Universal provides a fresh look at a classic and a reminder of how effective movie making could be in an era not so enamored of lust, violence, hokey situations and overdone effects.

With a screenplay by Horton Foote, Robert Mulligan's adaptation of Harper Lee's novel sets up 1930's small-town life in Macomb County, Ala., so simply and naturally that even its calamitous events – a rape trial and wrongful conviction of a black man in a white community, a suspected lynching and the assault of two young children – ground us in the realities of that place and time.

There is no sex, and most of the violence takes place off screen. The exception is the attack on the children – one of

them dressed up as a ham for Halloween – which depicts a man grappling with the pair and smacking them around as much as realism dictates.

Otherwise the quiet rhythms of rural village life prevail in a black-and-white film of such clarity (unusual on a videotape, which is set up in the letter-box format so that the image retains its movie-screen proportions) that one feels almost drawn into the action.

Not only does the lawyer Atticus Finch (Gregory Peck) risk vilification to defend the accused rapist (Brock Peters), but as a widower with two lively children (Mary Badham and Philip Alford) to raise, he imparts a calm intelligence and steadfastness. On screen, Mr. Peck holds the film together; off screen, he helped get it launched.

"Even though the book was a big best seller, money didn't come right away from the studios," Alan J. Pakula, the film's producer, said. "It really wasn't until Gregory Peck signed on that Universal agreed to the financing." As is the case today, rejection was swift for film proposals that didn't fall into a genre.

Mr. Pakula had an affiliation with Paramount at the time. "They said, 'What story do you plan to tell for the film?' I said, 'Have you read the book?' They said, 'Yes.' I said, 'That's the story.' "

He and Mr. Mulligan sent Mr. Peck the book. "All the time you ordinarily spend waiting to hear back from actors," Mr. Pakula said, "but this was one of those times you didn't wait at all. He called back immediately. No maybes." The fit was among the most natural things about a most natural film. "I must say the man and the character he played were not unlike," Mr. Pakula said.