

Midnight Cowboy [18] 1969 | USA | 113 mins

UK release date	25th September 1969, re-released 1994. 2019
Director	John Schlesinger
Screenplay	Waldo Salt
Cinematography	Adam Holender
Music	John Barry
Cast	Dustin Hoffman (Ratso Rizzo); Jon Voight (Joe Buck); Sylvia Miles (Cass); John McGiver (Mr. O'Daniel); Brenda Vaccaro (Shirley); Barnard Hughes (Towny); Ruth White (Sally Buck); Jennifer Salt (Annie); Bob Balaban (Young Student)

The only X-rated movie to win the Best Picture Oscar (the rating has since been commuted to an R), "Midnight Cowboy" is a brutal bummer about loneliness and destitution, a cinematically adroit "Lower Depths," with a stubbled, greasy Dustin Hoffman shivering in his unheated, condemned New York tenement as unsuccessful stud Jon Voight lies depressed and unemployed on the room's single cot.

But "Midnight Cowboy," rereleased after 25 years, is also a great picture, 113 minutes of stirring stuff, set to the ironic lilt of Jean "Toots" Thielemans's harmonica and Harry Nilsson's theme tune, "Everybody's Talkin'." Remember that Nilsson song? It comes in right after Texas hot-dog Joe Buck (Voight) has dolled himself up in front of the mirror, admired his physique and said -- in the general direction of the restaurant he's about to leave forever -- "You know what you can do with them dishes."

As he rides the bus to Manhattan, transistor glued to his ear, anticipating those rich, sexually frustrated Upper West Side matrons desperate for his services, he has no idea what's about to hit him. After meeting -- and being ripped off by -- two-bit hustler Ratso (Hoffman), he embarks on a one-way descent into the hustle and bustle of modern Hell.

The datedness factor in this 1969 picture is surprisingly minor. A surrealistically shot party scene is almost cutely quaint, as kooks, poseurs and hipsters turn on and tune in. Vietnam is rumbling ominously in the background. Although sex is

shown as a grimy, capitalistic commodity, it's still approved of as safe recreation. Smoking too remains a cool pleasure. As for lighting up a joint, it's still okay to inhale. But the fact is, in these unsentimental '90s, the movie's unrelenting grimness holds up very nicely. Beyond the toils and troubles of Joe Buck and Ratso (that's Enrico Salvatore Rizzo), the world itself is lost in hopeless isolation, wallowing in a poverty of money, morality and love.

Yet somehow, it's all wonderful to watch. Director John Schlesinger and screenwriter Waldo Salt, both of whom took Oscars, cinematographer Adam Holender and editor Hugh A. Robertson turn abject misery into a funky, visually lively experience. Most importantly, the performances by Hoffman and Voight are big. Voight is all good ol' bluster, a goofy, Lone Star Candide who whoops and yelps all the way to Hell. And as Ratso, Hoffman (ably smearing his bright debut in "The Graduate" with grungy bathos) enters the realm of movie folklore. "Frankly," he tells Buck during a particularly down moment, "you're beginning to smell. And for a stud in New York that's a handicap." And no one seeing this movie will forget Ratso crossing a busy street, beating on the taxi that almost knocks him down and yelling, "I'm walking heeeeeeeere!"

This "Cowboy" is back in the saddle -- and on the big screen. Don't wait for some cable rerun. Don't rent this thing on videotape. Connect with the past in the best possible way: Go to the damn movies.

After: **Desson Howe**, *Washington Post*, 15 April 1994

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