

reflecting Schrader's mind-set. In *Raging Bull*, he structured a plot about the real life boxer Jake La Motta; biographies of those who went off kilter appear to fascinate him. For instance *Auto Focus* (2002) looks back at the little-known actor Bob Crane who is remembered if at all for his turn in Hogan's Heroes.

Inevitably, *The Last Temptation of Christ* is perhaps Schrader's most outspoken statement on religion and Catholicism. Consistently, he has revealed a harshly critical streak of irreligiosity. He may not agree with that – from a personal perspective, it could be a questioning of faith with an underlying pain – but to the viewer, his consistent agnosticism, if one may call it that, has come off as audacious. Conversely after a point, the question of Catholicism and its acceptance as well as rejection, seems a burdensome cross to bear. Evidence: *Affliction* (1997) and *Forever Mine* (1999) which could have been narrated without the predictable asides about faith.

The writer-director is at the top of form when

he has an arresting story to tell, as with *American Gigolo*, his remake of *Cat People* (1982) and *Mishima: A Life In Four Chapters* (1985). These three are also his most stylish films, *American Gigolo* being especially fluid in its luminous cinematography, costume design and the use of a pop-rock soundtrack. He has told these stories in a manner that takes you close to the heart and mind of his characters, besides providing new insights on the subjects he has elected to tackle. The *Comfort of Strangers* (1999), adapted by Harold Pinter from a story by Ian McEwan on the efforts of a drug dealer to go straight, is criminally underrated.

When Schrader does not give us insights or a new take besides technical innovativeness, that's when I am troubled, as with *Patty Hearst* (1988). The film while being interestingly shot did not go beyond the startling case study of a kidnapped heiress-turned accomplice. It was the kind of real life story that Oliver Stone could have told with more frankness and reportage.

For me *Patty Hearst* was a let-down. Similarly, *Dominion: Prequel to The Exorcist* was not up his alley. It's believed that the studio honchos interfered far too much and some footage had to be shot by Renny Harlin. Be that as it may, the prequel is best forgotten.

Schrader works well with his male actors – Willem Dafoe in particularly, marvellous even in a relative brief role in *Affliction*. His women, though, are just not in the same league. He is not disrespectful of them but clearly, he is more at ease to make cinema with males in centrestage.

He is one of the few directors who likes to talk with the press, like he did when I was a rookie covering the New Delhi International Film Festival of India. He is more interested in your reactions to his work than explaining his art. He has been a consistent presence in the aisles of the mind, a creator who catches life at its most 'disorganised.'

(Khalid Mohamed is a critic, filmmaker and movie buff.)



USA / 1997/ 35 mm/
Colour / 114 min

The film is based on the novel by Russell Banks. Wade Whitehouse is a sheriff of a small New Hampshire town who achieved nothing in life in the opinion of his ex-wife Lillian and daughter Jill and is a heavy drinker. His girlfriend Margie accepts him the way he is. On the first day of the hunting season, Wade's friend Jack takes a wealthy businessman to hunt - and only Jack returns alive. Wade decides to play detective and starts investigating the case despite the fact Jack insists it was an accidental self-inflicted shot. His investigation influenced by his relationship with a violent, alcoholic father, his increasing obsession with his past, his fraught relationship with his ex-wife and daughter and the death of his mother. All of these issues precipitate a personal crisis for Wade as the investigation proceeds.

PRODUCER :

Linda Reisman

SCREENPLAY :

Paul Schrader (from the novel by Russell Banks)

DOP:

Paul Sarossy

EDITOR :

Jay Rabinowitz

MUSIC :

Michael Brook

CAST :

Nick Nolte, Sissy Spacek, James Coburn, Willem Dafoe, Mary Beth Hurt, Jim True

AFFLICTION