



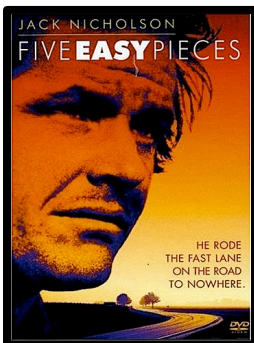
The Many Faces Karen Black By Jarrod Emerson

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Back in the late 1960's, amidst war protests, LSD trips, and Jefferson Airplane, an American New Wave of rebels and mavericks (Bogdonovich, Freidkin, Hopper, et al) crashed into Hollywood, bringing the shifting cultural landscape to the silver screen. Light-hearted fare of the previous decades soon took a backseat to stories that ventured into darker territory. Along for the ride was Karen Black, who (after Dennis Hopper cast her as an acid-dropping hooker in his groundbreaking 1969 flick, *Easy Rider*) became one of the American New Wave's greatest players.

Up to that point, Black's decade-old career had consisted primarily of small film roles and guest parts in television. However, Black's unconventional looks and unique sensibilities proved perfect for 1970's Hollywood, and her chameleonic talents blossomed in her roles of complex, colorful (and often troubled) characters. While her post-70's output was mainly relegated to B-grade schlock, Black retained a cult following up until her death on August 8th, 2013, when she lost a three-year battle with ampullary cancer.

The following four films are a testament to Karen Black's versatility:



1. Five Easy Pieces 1970 ★★★★★ At first glance, former classical pianist "Bobby Dupea" (Jack Nicholson) leads a comfortable life. Truthfully, it's anything but. His girl friend "Rayette" (Black) – an emotionally unstable, aspiring singer – periodically threatens suicide and has just become pregnant, and the criminal past of his friend "Elton" (Billy Bush) has finally caught up with him. When Bobby learns of his father's paralyzing stroke, he heads home to his estranged family in the Pacific Northwest, reluctantly bringing Rayette. The reunion, however, will be nowhere near as easy as "the five pieces" he plays throughout the film.

Of all of the 70's distraught youth flicks, Bob Rafelson's character-driven road story is one of the very greatest. The film's roles (even the minor ones) are extremely well

written, the performances – especially the Oscar-nominated ones from Nicholson and Black – are absolute dynamite, and László Kovács breathtaking cinematography skillfully captures both dusty Southern California and misty Washington State. The themes of restlessness and disillusionment running throughout are still as powerful today as they were four decades ago.

Five Easy Pieces is a raw and moving drama about uncertainty, agitation and human despair, with an ending that you'd be hard-pressed to find in mainstream Hollywood today. One of the film's many strong points is the turbulent relationship that the two main characters share. Albeit for different reasons, these are two very troubled people. Bobby is a restless malcontent who abandoned his background of privilege, reluctant to commit to anything. In arguably her very best performance, Karen Black infuses Rayette with multiple vulnerabilities. With her big head of hair and southern twang, Rayette's implied trailer park background couldn't be more different from Bobby's. Rayette lingers in her dreams of being a singer, but is trapped behind the counter of a greasy-spoon diner. Her insecurities cause numerous explosive arguments between her and Bobby. Nicholson and Black's raw chemistry is palpable, and, in my opinion, each should have walked away with an Oscar.



The Great Gatsby 1974 ★★☆☆☆

In the prosperous Jazz Age, if you live on Long Island, you've probably heard of "Jay Gatsby" (Robert Redford). Part celebrity, part enigma, Gatsby remains hidden in the shadows at his own lavish parties. His next-door neighbor is a young bonds salesman, "Nick Carraway" (Sam Waterston), a recent transplant from the mid-west. Across the bay in East Egg live Nick's rich, self-absorbed cousin, "Daisy Buchanan" (Mia Farrow), and her unfaithful husband, "Tom" (Bruce Dern). After Nick is invited to one of Gatsby's grand gatherings, Gatsby confides in Nick a yearning to rekindle an old romance he once shared with Daisy. It turns out the tuxedos, sparkling champagne, and the intoxicated dancing are all part of a grand plan to impress Daisy.

While F. Scott Fitzgerald's timeless take on the "American Dream" maintains a loyal following in classrooms across the country, attempts to film it are a different story. Like Baz Luhrmann's recent (2013) take, the 1974 version received mixed reviews. While many applauded its faithfulness to the novel, others considered it cumbersome for the exact same reason, accusing the director (Jack Clayton) of failing to fully capture the roaring twenties. The Great Gatsby's main weakness is a bloated screenplay, bogged down by things that don't translate well from page to film. For example: I think Francis Ford Coppola's adaptation would've been better off without Nick's narration.

However, the loathing is not entirely deserved as the film's strengths outweigh its weaknesses. In spite of its shortcomings, the script retains the themes of pain and manipulation – the dark side of the American Dream. Spot on is Clayton's choice as a director to run the opening titles (to the echoing sounds of Jazz) over the halls of Gatsby's empty mansion with its walls lined with photos of happier days. Douglas Solcombe, meanwhile, provided perfectly gorgeous, vividly colorful camera work.

What of the performances? Like the reviews, they are all over the place. Robert Redford is reasonably successful giving us a heartbroken "Gatsby". Mia Farrow as the shallow "Daisy" conveys a wide-eyed naiveté, making Daisy a more selfish version of her famous Rosemary Woodhouse role. The film's best performances, however, come from the supporting cast, where Karen Black strikes again. A crucial catalyst, Black's character "Myrtle Wilson" is the mistress to the conniving "Tom" (an effectively slimy turn from the reliable Bruce Dern). Like Five Easy Piece's "Rayette", Myrtle is a woman in anguish, this time in the form of a restless, thrill seeking flapper. She uses the affair with Tom as an escape from her marriage to complacent simpleton "George" (Scott Wilson). Unfortunately, Myrtle's unheeding tenacity proves destructive at

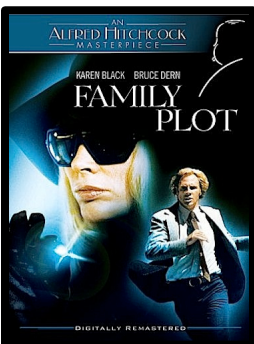
moments – such as when she mocks Tom by repeatedly screaming Daisy’s name to his face. The result? Tom breaks her nose in a fit of rage. This is just the beginning of the trouble her recklessness causes for both she and others. Both Dern and Black do a terrific job with these two volatile characters, breathing life into tale of human suffering and malice.



Nashville 1975 ★★★★★ As if I needed another reason to love the 1970’s, this is when the late Robert Altman graduated from television to film, allowing him to blossom into one of the New Hollywood’s greatest auteurs. In Nashville, Altman and writer Joan Tewkesbury crafted a grand vista of culture, character and raw emotion. In this nearly indescribable film, the lives of 24 very different people intersect in the musical oasis of Nashville, Tennessee. Musicians, politicians, journalists, and groupies are just a few of the colorful characters the viewer is introduced to as the city gears up for a visit from rising third-party political star, “Hal Philip Walker”.

With Nashville’s massive ensemble, we are treated to interweaving storylines of dreams, confusion, agendas, infidelity, manipulation, and grief. Watching all of this is rather like being at a party where you manage to drift around just enough to meet all the interesting people. It may run close to 3 hours, but it’s a damn deep 3 hours. During the preparation for the upcoming political rally we are treated to every angle of the events. Between the political organizers (Michael Murphy, Ned Beatty), veteran and aspiring singers (Henry Gibson, Lilly Tomlin, Keith Carradine, Barbara Harris), mysterious drifters (Jeff Goldblum, David Hayward) and an annoying journalist (Geraldine Chaplin), nearly every walk of life is represented here.

At first glance, Karen Black’s piece in this cinematic jigsaw puzzle may seem rather small, but it is an important piece. Black’s character, country star “Connie White”, serves as a rival to beloved Nashville sweetheart “Barbara Jean” (singer Ronee Blakely in a terrific screen debut). After Barbara Jean suffers a nervous breakdown, Connie steps in as her replacement in a Grand Ole Opry performance. Shining like a prom queen in her sparkly crimson dress, Connie plays to a captive audience as a bed ridden Barbara Jean reluctantly listens from her hospital room. Although they share no scenes, the two characters form a yin-yang-like equation. Whereas Barbara Jean is arguably the more unique, original act of the two with far greater critical acclaim, it has drained her of her sanity and led to her breakdown. Hearing her friendly nemesis on the radio only pushes her further down. Alternatively, the less-talented Connie seems to have her personal act together. Interestingly, at no point did Karen Black ever pursue a career as a professional singer, but you’d never know it from her tunes here. Unlike most other musical films, Black (as well as others in the cast) wrote and performed her own numbers, which she sings perfectly. Her beauty and heartfelt performances are a joy to watch. Black further enhances the role with amusing subtleties – such as her failure to recognize actress Julie Christie (one of several cameos) and not believing anyone’s assertions that she is indeed a famous Academy-Award winning actress! Interestingly, “Connie White” seems like the sort of person Five Easy Pieces’ “Rayette” dreamt of being.



Family Plot 1976 ★★☆☆☆ Phony psychic “Blanche Tyler” (Barbara Harris) receives an offer she cannot refuse from one of her loyal clients, the wealthy “Julia Rainbird” (Cathleen Nesbitt). In exchange for locating Mrs. Rainbird’s long-lost nephew “Edward Shoebridge”, Blanche will receive 10,000 dollars. Jumping at the chance, Blanche and her swindler boyfriend “George Lumley” (Bruce Dern) set out to track Edward down. It never occurs to them that Shoebridge might wish to remain hidden at all costs. Turns out, Shoebridge, now living as jeweler “Arthur Adamson” (William Devane) and his girlfriend “Fran” (Karen Black) have been

committing a series of kidnappings to collect valuable stones. A simple score soon becomes a dangerous web for Blanche and George.

For what turned out to be his swansong, the legendary Alfred Hitchcock and longtime collaborator Ernest Lehman adapted the mystery novel *The Rainbird Pattern*. An interesting contrast to Hitchcock's previous *Frenzy*, *Family Plot* is a light-hearted throwback to his earlier work as it attempts to be high on both suspense and laughs. The result manages to be an entertaining film whose charm lies mainly with its casting. I enjoyed watching Bruce Dern stumble through detective work as he unravels the mystery behind Shoebridge's whereabouts. From the opening, he and Barbara Harris exchange fun banter as the con-artist couple trying to make a score they can retire on.

Karen Black's character has a memorable, striking look, and receives a killer introduction as she collects the ransom in order to return a victim. Initially mute and armed, she sports a black trench coat, fedora, gloves, shades and a blonde wig (wonder why she was the focus of all the promotional materials, eh?). Only after the exchange of the victim and the diamond does Fran remove her disguise to reveal the familiar face of Black. In spite of her unsettling introduction, Fran's soft side is revealed as she becomes more reluctant to participate in Arthur's increasingly violent schemes. Together she and William Devane make quite the villainous couple. *Family Plot* is far from Hitchcock's finest hour, but nonetheless manages to be an entertaining couple of hours thanks to some terrific performances.

MY BOTTOM LINE:

We have yet to see another era that appreciates offbeat characters to the extent that the American New Wave did. Karen Black's cinematic contributions during this decade have endured remarkably well.

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A graduate of Columbia College film school, JARROD EMERSON has been working with Films42.com since 2007. With interests ranging from screenwriting to improv, he is grateful to Jan and Rich for their support, and for giving him a reason/excuse to watch even more movies! The bottom line is: there can never be too much cinema in Jarrod's life!