Wild Bill

(Dir. Walter Hill)

Walter Hill's *Wild Bill* is a highly literate Western that has been garnering a lot of well-deserved praise despite apparently having been abandoned by its original distributor. That a film of this quality should only get brief runs at rep cinemas is testimony to the cynicism and greed of the North American commercial film industry.

Set mostly in 1870s Deadwood, South Dakota, *Wild Bill* is not a revisionist Western in the vein of Eastwood's *Unforgiven*, but is arguably a stronger film all around, particularly in terms of the acting, and Hill is undeniably the reigning king of Western directors. If Peckinpah's recently re-released *Wild Bunch* was its apotheosis, *Wild Bill* is the Western's eloquent elegy. Despite Hill's sensitivity toward the "other" in American history (native, black, Chinese), the film's focus remains the self-sufficient and unrepentant hero of superior abilities. In the case of James Butler Hickok, the legendary gunslinger (perfectly embodied by Jeff Bridges), relations with challengers are utterly straightforward: all that is required is that the other draw first, and then Hickok's reflexes take over. The exact nature of his relationships with women, however—especially a friend and former lover like Calamity Jane (Ellen Barkin)—remains inscrutable to him and eventually proves to be his undoing.

If *Wild Bill* has a flaw, it is in the character of Bill's friend, Charley Prince (John Hurt), a well-spoken, slightly effete Englishman who provides voiceover narration for the film's beginning and end, but which is otherwise too sporadic to do the narrative any real service.

As for Hickok, the "aging" gunman (he died at 39), he seeks escape from self-reflection and doubt as much as failing eyesight, and the whiskey- and mud-stained shades of the present tense scenes give way to the dark and otherworldy atmosphere of a Chinese opium den, which in turn gives way to hallucinatory, high-contrast black-and-white flashback sequences. Under the pipe's mnemonic influence, Hickok receives not oblivion but an encrypted prediction of his end—a set of clues that will be recognized only too late, but which will spell release from the prison of his fame.

-Russ Kilbourn

The Neon Bible

(Dir. Terence Davies)

There is a lot of Bible but little or no neon in Terence Davies' latest, *The Neon Bible*, based on a novel by John Kennedy Toole (*A Confederacy of Dunces*), written when he was 16 and not discovered until long after his suicide, in 1969, at the age of 31. If the novel bears any resemblance to this film, it is hardly surprising that Toole kept it hidden until he was well beyond reach. Toole's life story, in fact, is far more interesting than the narrative that unfolds in disjointed flashbacks, in the painfully long hour-and-a-half of Davies' film.

The story of David (the vapid Jacob Tierney), a young boy growing up in a small southern Bible Belt town in the '30s and '40s, *The Neon Bible*, like Davies' other works (*The Long Day Closes* and *Distant Voices, Still Lives*), is clearly conceived in terms of restraint—a generally laudable stylistic choice in an American film industry where generally little or nothing is left to the viewer's imagination. (Davies is British.) *The Neon Bible*, however, is not so much understated as underwritten. It's not that Davies, also the screenwriter, withholds too much information; halfway through, the feeling becomes inescapable that there may not have been much there to begin with. All the protracted takes and numbingly slow tracking shots only force the viewer to wonder why these techniques ever succeed in other films, such as those by Tarkovsky. This is especially disappointing in a film that appears to require a certain emotional investment on the viewer's part. Davies admits to a desire to move people rather than make them cry, telling the story more or less from David's point of view: there is his proud, but brutal father (Denis Leary); his "hyper-sensitive" mother (Diana Scarwid), who slips rather suddenly into madness, as if to escape the tedium of her role; and especially his flamboyant, but fading Aunt Mae (Gena Rowlands, best known for her work with John Cassavetes), a permanent house guest since the demise of her night club singing career.

David's memories, prompted by the rhythm of the train that's taking him as far away as possible from his town (and right out of the film), all look as if they were shot on depthless, underlit sets, which, rather than evoking the Southern Gothic, brings to mind Andrew Wyeth paintings, which apparently was Davies' intention. It speaks volumes about *The Neon Bible* that the title image—what Davies calls a "powerful metaphor"—vanishes after the opening credits. If only I had done the same.

-Russ Kilbourn