



THE LEARNING TREE is a February, 2017 LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library. Below is Kino Ken's appraisal of that dvd film.

United States 1969 color 107 minutes live action feature drama Winger
Producers: Gordon Parks and Jimmy Lydon

6 of a possible 20 points

½ of a possible ****

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

(j) designates a juvenile performer

Points

- 1 Direction: Gordon Parks**
- 0 Editing: George Rohrs**
- 1 Cinematography: Burnett Guffey**
- 0 Lighting: Gibby Germaine**
- Special Photographic Effects: Albert Whitlock**
- 0 Screenplay: Gordon Parks from his novel**
- Music Supervisor: Sonny Burke Score Mixing: Dan Wallin**
- 1 Music: Gordon Parks**
- 1 Production Design: Edward Engeron**
- Set Decoration: Joanne MacDougall**
- Set Dressing: Frank Brown**
- Makeup: George Bau**
- Props: Lou Sluskin**

1 **Sound**
 Sound Recording: George Hause
 Sound Mixing: Robert Miller
1 **Acting**
0 **Creativity**
6 total points

Cast: Kyle Johnson (j) (Newt Winger), Alex Clarke (Marcus Savage), Estelle Evans (Sarah Winger, Newt’s mother), Dana Elcar (Kirky, the sheriff), Mira Waters (Arcella Jefferson), Joel Fluellen (Uncle Rob), Malcolm Atterbury (Silas Newhall, an alcoholic), Richard Ward (Booker Savage, Marcus’s father), Russell Thorson (Judge Cavanaugh), Peggy Rea (Miss McClintock, teacher), Carol Lamond (Big Mabel), Kevin Hagen (Doc Tim Cravens), Jimmy Rushing (Chappie Logan), Dub Taylor (Spikey), Felix Nelson (Jack Winger, Newt’s father), George Mitchell (Jake Kiner), Saundra Pearl Sharp (Prissy Winger, Newt’s sister), Steven Perry (Jappy), Don Dubbins (Harley Davis, defense attorney), Jon Lormer (McCormack), Morgan Sterne (Mr. Hall), Thomas Anderson (Pastor Broadnap), Phillip Roye (Pete Winger, Newt’s older brother), Carter Vinnegar (Seansy), Bobby Goss (Skunk McDowell), Zooey Hall (Chauncey Cavanaugh, judge’s son), Alfred Jones (Cap’n Tuck), Tony Teebo (Farm Boy), Hope Summers (Mrs. Kiner), others

THE LEARNING TREE, directed by famed photographer Gordon Parks, was the first major post-Civil Rights Act movie to focus chiefly on black families. Based on a novel by Parks, it recounted the moral testing of an adolescent black farm boy in 1920s Kansas. Reputedly hewing close in many details to autobiography, the plot concerns the family of protagonist Newt Winger, who confronts prejudice from both sides of the color divide. His nemesis is another black teen, Marcus Savage, whose unruly home upbringing paves the way for vicious, contemptible treatment of anyone daring to challenge him. Newt’s a particularly frustrating target, one all too often presented as positive role model.

Thanks, but no thanks, is the response from young Savage.

Marcus is first observed urging theft of apples from a white neighbor's orchard. When the owner intervenes, giving chase with a whip, Marcus receives a few thrashes. Then he grabs the man's weapon and brutally turns it against him.

Peer onlookers gape in mingled horror and dissociation. They realize the eventual outcome won't reward a black victor in the long run. Newt is aghast.

Their local law officer is summoned by the white victim's family. He takes Marcus into custody after first mistakenly accusing Newt of beating Mr. Kiner.

Sheriff Kirky's a stereotypical bigoted, undereducated bully. His law enforcement protocol is to shoot fleeing blacks first, ask questions only if absolutely necessary afterwards. He commits several unjustifiable murders during the course of two years in Cherokee Flats, Kansas.

Marcus blames his arrest on Newt, vowing to take vengeance once released. Found guilty of assailing a white, he's sentenced to a stay in Juvenile Detention. There, encounters with sadistic white guards feed his determination to strike back. Beginning, for no particularly obvious reasons, with Newt. Who is neither white nor tormentor.

While Marcus stewes in a youth center, Newt courts a new arrival in town, Arcella Jefferson. Arcella's pretty, respectful, studious, vulnerable to flattery. So much so that she allows Judge Cavanaugh's son to escort her around town, resulting in lamentable pregnancy shameful to both white and black families involved.

As usual, Newt's blamed first for what happens, this time due to publicly observed personal attraction to the girl. When he denies playing seducer, mother Sarah supports his testimony. Newt's father, curiously, is less sure of his son's probity.

Jack, though, is overruled by his spouse. So the Wingers bring Newt over to the Jefferson home to confront Arcella. They find her cowering under fierce accusatory interrogation by an embarrassed paterfamilias. The whole mess could have been short-circuited by preventive reporting of Chauncey Cavanaugh's over-attentiveness to an overly submissive classmate. Instead Newt tells Arcella's mom a lie about her whereabouts and companion.

The upshot is a quick furtive departure from Cherokee Flats by the Jefferson clan, followed by his dad's belated punishment of Chauncey. Judge Cavanaugh privately promises Jack and Sarah Winger (not the Jeffersons) the mixed race result of his son's misconduct will be provided for. By an abortion, perhaps? The screenplay leaves this assertion hanging, unamplified.

Like the proverbial cat, Marcus returns to town, getting himself decked in a spur-of-the-moment boxing match with Newt, who has been treated by protective older brother to a series of training sessions in the gentlemanly art of self-defense. This fiasco aggravates the loser even more than Winger's previous actions, stoking flames of an ever-mounting bonfire.

Another blatant incident of discrimination is revealed when Miss McClintock, a Caucasian teacher irresponsibly assigned to instruct and supply guidance to minority race students, arbitrarily confers an unmerited low grade on college-bound Newt, assuring him post-secondary education will bring neither success nor pleasure. He should concentrate on general courses in preparation for a manual job.

Newt shoots off his mouth in righteous indignation. Which gets him escorted to the principal's office where intimidated administrator is more intent on insuring the youth show proper respect for teachers than overruling and admonishing an overreaching subordinate.

Marcus, intolerant of paternal cooking and friendly overtures, obtains a custodial job at the town's cathouse. It's presided over by Chappie Logan, who unwisely allows his new employee a glance at loaded pistol resting temptingly in a bedroom drawer.

Marcus's dad Booker is a regular attendee there. One day while visiting Chappie's, he overhears another frequenter, Silas Newhall, vow payback against former boss Jake Kiner. Silas has been fired due to consequences of his alcoholism. He plans to steal some of Kiner's treasured whiskey bottles in lieu of back wages he believes are owed him.

Booker figures to get free refreshments for himself. He arrives on the scene at Jake Kiner's barn in time to take advantage of squabbling between drunken Silas and the owner. Ambushing and killing Jake, he leaves an unconscious Silas

conspicuously close to the murder weapon. Framing an innocent white man is quite acceptable behavior in his opinion.

However, a silent witness in barn hayloft with an overhead view of killing below might just be willing to testify against him. Even if to do so ignites simmering tensions between white and black community members.

Newt's testimony exonerates Silas. An unexpectedly incriminated Booker, who couldn't resist being present at the proceedings, panics at threats of an immediate lynching. He bolts out of the courtroom only to find himself locked in an adjacent chamber. Despairing, he shoots himself to death.

All this agitation is too much for weakened Sarah Winger to bear. She dies. Coming home from her funeral, Newt finds Marcus stalking him, set on eradicating the cause of his father's death. Will Newt be the next fatality in town?

THE LEARNING TREE movie's greatest fault is reliance on a weak point-of-view character who consistently is acted upon rather than initiator of action. Newt is reactive, rather than proactive. It doesn't help matters he's directed morally by sermonettes from Mother and blind Uncle Rob.

While Parks nobly attempted to exhibit the deleterious effects of racism on perpetrator and target alike, his limited knowledge of white behavior is only too apparent. Clichéd dialogue and artificial confrontations ineptly generate preconceived violent outcomes. Virtually every white is either a craven, hypocritical progressive or rambunctious racist. Blacks subdivide into Uncle Toms and Nat Turners. Take your pick.

Thoughtful conciliation and empathy are totally absent from a screenplay arriving at the worst possible time. THE LEARNING TREE did nothing to better race relations, reverting to antagonisms of prior decades. It remains today a dated relic to America's inglorious discriminatory past.

As for the movie itself, then-fashionable soft-focus scenes, metaphor matching edits, and performances egregiously overacted or coolly non-committal make for decidedly uneven drama. Marcus seems relentlessly disposed to think ill of everyone he meets. Newt's tepid morality makes viewers want to shake him into positive action.

Worse, for a production under the supervision of a master photographer, **THE LEARNING TREE** fails to incorporate a single memorable image in its one hundred and seven minutes of unreeling. It also is plagued by two disparate plot strands, each of which periodically meander off into subplots far removed from the central through-line of Parks' story: the choice between active revolt against injustice and passive acceptance of it.

Parks himself chose the former. His sympathy lies clearly with Marcus, rebel and malcontent. Newt's forbearance is actually repugnant to watch, even if historically accurate. It's hard to picture contemporary blacks adopting that cool, observational approach to systematic rebuffs and insults.

None of the actors seem notably committed. Estelle Evans is so subdued she makes foreground scenes appear backgrounds. Arcella is voiced quite differently in various episodes, sometimes with a soft treble appropriate to her age, at other moments with a harsh, mature throatiness. As if two different speakers were reading her lines. This may stem from ill-matched additional dialogue recording in post-production.

Variable lighting quality, over-conspicuous blunt editing, and tritely insubstantial theme music composed by Parks himself do nothing to elevate the movie overall. Sets and sound recording are adequate. Nothing more.

Now enshrined in the National Film Registry of the Library of Congress, **THE LEARNING TREE** is more abortive tilt at *The Great American Dilemma* than incisive depiction of a social problem still undermining universal equality and brotherhood in the United States.

Due to an early episode involving corruption of a minor, frequent expletives, multiple killings, brutal violence, and an offscreen suicide, **THE LEARNING TREE** is strictly adult viewing fare.

Warner Archives' dvd-r release contains no bonus materials.

Watch it if curious, but don't expect an inflammatory masterwork.