

(*NY Times* review by Janet Maslin)

There's an insolence about *Renaldo & Clara*, the four-hour film written and directed by Bob Dylan and featuring members of his Rolling Thunder Revue, that is not easily ignored. Mr Dylan, who has a way of insinuating that any viewer who doesn't grasp the full richness of his work must be intellectually deficient or guilty of some failure of nerve, has seen fit to produce a film that no one is likely to find altogether comprehensible. Yet for anyone even marginally interested in Mr Dylan - and for anyone willing to accept the idea that his evasiveness, however exasperating, is a crucial aspect of his finest work - *Renaldo & Clara* holds the attention at least as effectively as it tries the patience.

No knowledge of Mr Dylan or his history is supposed to be central to an understanding of the film, but it nevertheless trades heavily upon his past. The singer David Blue, playing himself, talks about the artistic climate of Greenwich Village when Mr Dylan first arrived there and Joan Baez is rather coyly cast as Mr Dylan's former lover. Mr Dylan, even more coyly, is cast as someone other than himself, a very vague figure named Renaldo.



As an actor, Mr Dylan specializes in giving the simultaneous impressions that he isn't really interested in acting and that he is always acting anyway. Renaldo is thus virtually useless as a character, but his alleged presence in the film does help call attention to Mr Dylan's obsessive camouflaging of his feelings, a tendency that produces the film's only intelligible conceit. There are only two central characters in the film, a man and a woman, yet their identities are splintered and then parcelled out to a dozen different actors.

The woman is most frequently played by Sara Dylan, who is now Mr Dylan's ex-wife, but aspects of her can also be seen in Miss Baez, Ronee Blakley and Helena Kallianiotes. Mr Dylan, Ronnie Hawkins and Rob Stoner are among the actors who

stand in for the man. The two lovers, apparently about to become ex-lovers, are irremediably locked in battle, but the device of fluctuating identities prevents them from ever confronting each other face to face.

This technique, not unlike one used by Robert Altman in *Images*, is potentially an intriguing one, but Mr Dylan's love of mystery prevails over his exhibitionism, with disappointing results. Most of the actors here seem to be playing either Mr or Mrs Dylan and all of them slavishly do the director's bidding. But Mr Dylan's instructiveness, to his actors and to his audience, is incomplete. *Renaldo & Clara* is so personal it borders on being obscure, yet it remains surprisingly deficient in personality. The figure who dominates the film is a man in hiding.

Mr Dylan has always been elusive; that's no mean part of his charm. But his best work, like the album *Blood On The Tracks*, released a couple of years ago, has derived its momentum from alternating currents of passion and restraint, from conflicting impulses to repress and to reveal. *Renaldo & Clara* addresses this apparent contradiction so passively, even cold-bloodedly, that it seldom has the urgency it needs. The film is full of connections to be made and riddles to be solved, but it approaches these things so dispassionately that the viewer has little choice but to follow suit.



Even though Mr Dylan makes it clear that he in no way wanted to make a concert film, the footage of him in performance provides not only the film's most electrifying moments but also its most emblematic ones. On the Rolling Thunder tour, Mr Dylan performed in whiteface, and he is photographed here, in tight close-up, singing so ferociously that his sweat melts the make-up; the film's sense of a person at war with a mask is never more riveting than when the camera studies Mr Dylan's face as he sings. Every detail of these shots is resonant, from the fiery look in Mr Dylan's eyes to the fresh flowers that someone has apparently been hired to tuck into his hat-brim, just before each show.

The film contains more than its share of dead weight, but it is seldom genuinely dull. On the credit side, there are a great many isolated images that have an independent vitality, from the sight of Joan Baez looking unexpectedly dreamy in a white gown to the spectacle of Allen Ginsberg, introduced as *without a doubt a very interesting and clever personality*, reading his poetry to a bewildered band of middle-aged ladies.



It's a pity that the editing of the film, which is credited to Mr Dylan and Howard Alk, pays so little heed to consistency. Following a pattern of linear thought is clearly not one of the film's concerns, but maintaining a constant degree of intensity should have been; this way, by carelessly commingling very complex and suggestive episodes with very flat and simple ones, the editing continually throws an already befuddled viewer even further off balance. Interludes like the culminating meeting of Mr Dylan, Mrs Dylan and Miss Baez, at once quite rarefied and in an atmosphere that is amusingly mundane, and an exceedingly one-note segment devoted to Hurricane Carter, are so incompatible that they simply don't belong in the same movie.

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**STARS** Four