



The California Dolls (aka ...All the Marbles)

Director: Robert Aldrich
Production Companies: The Aldrich Company, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer
Producer: William Aldrich
Associate Producers: Walter Blake, Eddie Saeta
Production Associate: Eric Schwab
Production Manager: Eddie Saeta
Location Manager: Lynn Kuwahara
2nd Unit Director: Adell Aldrich
Assistant Directors: Tom McCrory, Charles Myers, Robert Shue, Paul Moen, Kevin Finnegan, Richard Allen, Michael Looney
Screenplay: Mel Frohman
Director of Photography: Joseph Biroc
2nd Unit Photographer: Bill Birch
Camera Operators: Fred Smith, Tom Laughridge
2nd Unit Camera Operator: John Dustin
Special Effects: Dennis Dion
Editors: Irving Rosenblum, Richard Lane
Production Designer: Carl Anderson
Art Director: B.B. Neel
Set Decorator: Stuart Reiss
Special Costume Design: Bob Mackie
Men's Costumes: Charles E. James
Women's Costumes: Vou Lee Giokaris, Charmaine Simmons
Make-up: Bill Turner
Special Sequence Hairstyles: Sydney Guilaroff
Title Design: Walter Blake
Titles and Opticals: MGM Title
Music: Frank De Vol
Music Director: Tom Worrall
Music Supervisor: Harry V. Lojewski
Music Editor: Joe Tuley
Choreography: Kathryn Doby
Sound Recording: Richard Church
Sound Re-recording: Michael J. Kohut, Jay M. Harding, Frank Reale
Sound Editing: New Creative Sound
Dialogue Editor: Rich Steven
Stunt Co-ordinator: Mickey Gilbert
Wrestling Sequences Adviser: Mildred Burke
Wrestling Trainers: Marlene Petrilli, Pedro Serrano, Adolfo Plascencia, Gustavo Torres, Karen McKay
Cast:
Peter Falk (*Harry Sears*)
Vicki Frederick (*Iris*)
Laurene Landon (*Molly*)
Burt Young (*Eddie Cisco*)
Tracy Reed (*Diane*)
Ursaline Bryant-King (*June*)
Claudette Nevins (*Solly*)
Richard Jaeckel (*Bill Dudley, Reno Referee*)
John Hancock (*Big John Stanley*)
Lenny Montana (*Jerome*)
Charlie Dell (*Merle LeFevre*)
Chick Hearn, Joe Greene (*themselves*)
Cliff Emmich (*obese promoter*)
Clyde Kusatsu (*Clyde Yamashita*)
Marlene Petrilli (*1st Akron wrestler*)
Karen McKay (*2nd Akron wrestler*)
Jon Terry (*Akron doctor*)
Alvin Hammer (*geisha doctor*)
Angela Aames (*Louise*)
Stanley Brock (*Myron*)
Susan Mechsner (*1st creature*)
Leslie Henderson (*2nd creature*)
Taemi Hagiwara (*1st geisha*)
Ayumi Hori (*2nd geisha*)
Faith Minton (*Big Mama*)

Moviedrome: Bringing the Cult TV Series to the Big Screen

The California Dolls (aka ...All the Marbles)

The screening on Wednesday 23 July will be introduced by season curator and Moviedrome's producer Nick Freand Jones

'What is a cult film? A cult film is one which has a passionate following but does not appeal to everybody. Just because a movie is a cult movie does not automatically guarantee quality. Some cult films are very bad. Others are very, very good. Some make an awful lot of money at the box office. Others make no money at all. Some are considered quality films. Others are exploitation.' From 1988 to 2000 *Moviedrome* was presented by Alex Cox and then Mark Cousins. Across that time, more than 200 features were shown, and generations of movie fans and filmmakers would be informed and inspired by the selection, alongside the wit and wisdom of the introductions that preceded each screening. *Moviedrome* was a portal into the world of weird and wonderful cinema. This two-month season features some of the most notable titles screened and wherever possible they are preceded by the original televised introduction.

Nick Freand Jones, season curator and producer of *Moviedrome*

Alex Cox: *The California Dolls* is a road movie about women's tag-team wrestling. It was directed in 1981 by Robert Aldrich, who also did *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*, *Hush...* *Hush Sweet Charlotte* and other 'women's films', as well as *The Dirty Dozen* and *The Grissom Gang*.

A film called *The California Dolls* about tag-team wrestling sounds about as exploitative as it can be, but fear not. Lurking behind the crass premise is a good film, well acted by Peter Falk, Vicki Frederick and Lauren Landon, about how horrible and grim and frustrating it is to drive around the United States in a run-down Cadillac promoting women's tag-team wrestling. And lurking in the background, ready to buy up the winning package, are the Japanese.

Like all road movies, this one is about America and the death of the American dream. But unlike most other road movies, it isn't elitist or obscure. All three of the main characters are honest people with jobs to do and so are their opponents.

The stunt fighting is pretty good, at least for a wrestling match. And the script, by Mel Frohman, asks all the good Peckinpah questions: How do you hang on to self-respect in a corrupt society? What is of value besides money and greed? *The California Dolls* was originally entitled ...*All the Marbles* – an American expression which means 'winner takes all' or 'playing for keeps'.

Look out for the cardboard extras during the crowd scenes.

Alex Cox's original introduction for *Moviedrome*. Also published in *Moviedrome: The Guide* (BBC, 1990). With thanks to moviedromer.tumblr.com

A contemporary review

'Problem: survival' as the voice-over of conscience has it in *The Big Knife*, and just recently it seemed that Aldrich had found the problem (survival vs. integrity) too tough to crack, and had either opted out or failed to notice his grip slipping (in interviews, he talks about his choirboys' shenanigans as a fall from grace comparable to that of *The Big Knife's* tortured hero). The problem – and Aldrich, it might be said – is back more cogently in ... *All the Marbles*, a film which is by no means the equal of his mid-70s work but which has clearly arrived at an interesting level of awareness: of the state of the nation in the recessed 80s and of the kind of environment in which the director might consequently be working as an entertainer.

The film has also undergone, in this country, a title change similar to *The Longest Yard*, in which the sobriquet of the team fighting for all the marbles is given pride of

Irma Eugenia Aguilar (1st Mexican wrestler)
Martha Louisa Coello (2nd Mexican wrestler)
Gustavo Torres (Mexican referee)
Paul Greenwood (mud-wrestling MC)
Adolfo Plascencia (geisha referee)
William J. Kulzer (Akron referee)
Don Brodie (Reno timekeeper)
Lennie Bremen (no-name promoter)
Gloria Hayes (Jerome's girlfriend)
Perry Cook (doctor)
Charles Anderson, Randy McClane,
Ray Homesley, Steve White (bodybuilders)
Cosmo Sardo (barber)
Ernie Fuentes (man with dice)
Johnnie Decker (warehouse box man)
Nicholas Shields (warehouse player)
Dan Magiera (warehouse stickman)
Susan Barnes (Merle's wife)
Chuck Hicks, Gary R. McLarty (thugs)
Joseph Margo (service station attendant)
Ivan Ditmars (organist)
USA 1981
112 mins
35mm

A BFI National Archive print

Moviedrome transmission date: 11 June 1989

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place. The temptation to see this as *The Longest Yard* of women's wrestling is useful, however, in only one respect: the diminution of the team to two contenders and one woebegone manager, and of the setting from the metaphorical arena of Nixonian politics to the insistently socialist-realist landscapes of the industrial Mid-West. It is this last element, in fact, which signals both that the genre rules of *The Longest Yard* (and of *The Choirboys* and *The Frisco Kid*) no longer quite apply, and that the problem of survival is now rather a basic matter.

This is the American Dream become, not a nightmare as the reflex formulation has it, but a close-to-the-bone pragmatism, and Aldrich judiciously balances the bleakly distanced long shots as his aspiring tag team travels from one uninviting location to the next – finally making it in the 'unreal' neon glitter of Reno, 'the biggest little city in the world' – with a running joke about their subsisting on fast-food and candy machines. One might note the girls' brief excursion to a drive-thru supermarket as just the kind of detail that Schlesinger made such a heavy-handed botch of in *Honky Tonk Freeway*. The point about the relationship between the wrestlers and their audience has probably already been made before Molly remarks, as they are driving past the infernal glow of a smelter, 'Do you think we've got it tough? How'd you like to work in there?'

But one suspects that there is more than a socialist-realist (or back-to-grass-roots) perspective embedded here. In final explanation of the operatic arias that he is forever playing on cassette, Harry observes of Pagliacci: 'He's kind of like a strolling player. He goes from town to town entertaining people. Sometimes it isn't easy.' From there it is not too far to a reading of ...*All the Marbles* as Aldrich's own running of the gauntlet, a test of personal honesty in the real backwaters of the country rather than in Clifford Odets' theatrical arena of artistic integrity, and to seeing the peregrinations of this threesome as parallel to the preview testing of a movie, from industrial hall to show-biz opening. Harry's triumphant feat of staging before the climactic Reno contest – with an excited TV commentator agog over the choreography of the Dolls' entrance, and the referee complaining, 'This is a wrestling match, not a vaudeville show' – would support such a reading, even as some of Harry's devices (unfurling a banner proclaiming the California Republic) reveal the film playing to some interesting grass-roots sympathies.

Interesting also is a kind of subtext in this final bout, to do with diversification in adversity and Hollywood's own industrial base, since the luxury into which Harry finally transports his girls is represented by the MGM Grand Hotel. The old MGM logo of the roaring lion fronts ...*All the Marbles*; but the new stylised version is part of the décor in the Reno arena. In other respects, there are many signs of the old Aldrich – most regrettably in the fact that it doesn't seem to make too much difference that the sporting heroes here are women (despite Harry's statutory involvement with Iris, and the latter casually prostituting herself to Eddie Cisco to save the day). By a quick feminist tally, there is only one significant scene which the female duo has together apart from Harry, and there is a curious nullity about all the scenes which try to establish an abrasive buddy relationship between the three of them.

Aldrichian cynicism quite nicely bolsters the mood of a getting-by road movie, particularly in the scene where Harry finally puts together a substantial stake at the gaming table, then casually waylays the hoods who have been sent after him and adds their wallets to his winnings. ...*All the Marbles* is probably what is usually referred to as a transitional movie, but is often exhilaratingly so. Not least of the pleasures of its self-consciousness is its humour, especially in the way it clinches the connection with *The Big Knife* (and puts the problem of survival on a more mundane level) through Harry's frequent reference to that film's original author. 'As Clifford Odets would say,' he observes at the end of some incidental tale of woe, 'it's better than sticking a pencil in your eye.'

Richard Combs, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, December 1981