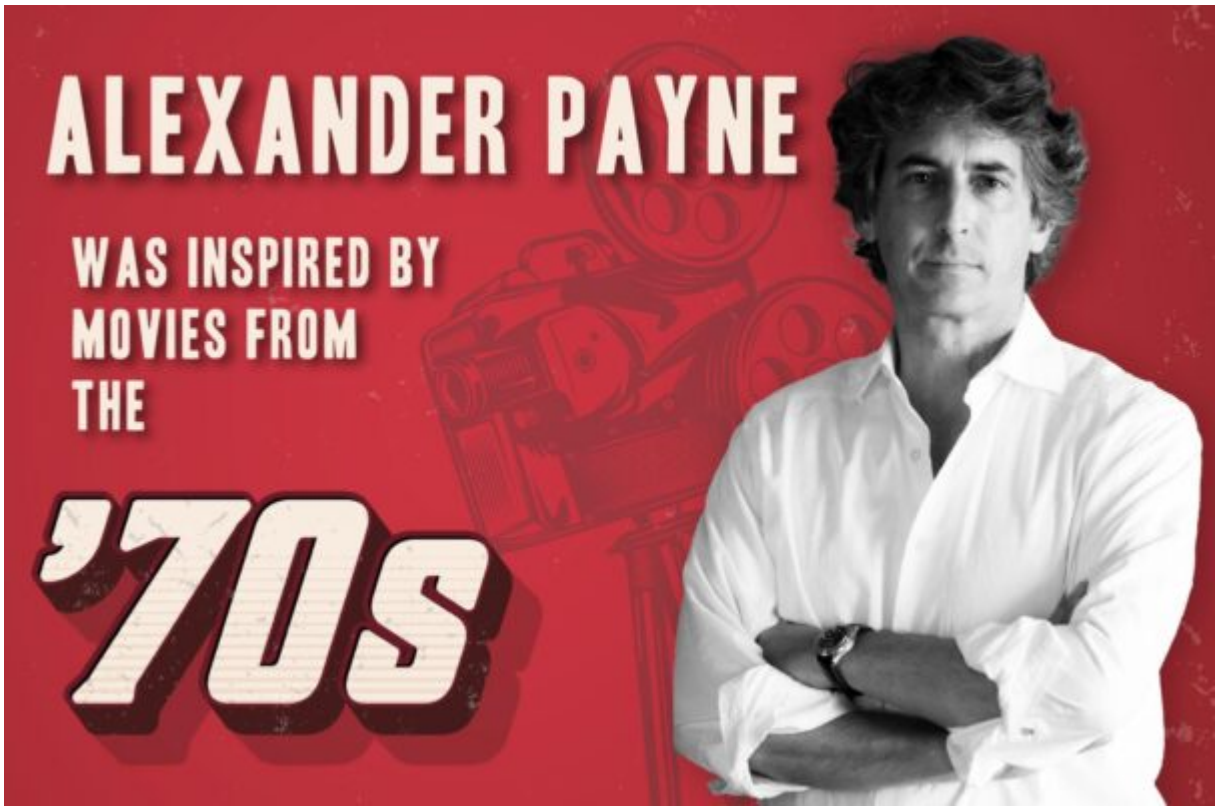
Cultural Daily

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Alexander Payne: Movies From the ’70s Inspired My Career

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An artist’s inspiration can come from anywhere. For Alexander Payne, his inspiration comes from the movies of the 1970’s.

Some of Academy Award-winning filmmaker Alexander Payne’s earliest memories are about going to the movies with his mother, Peggy, near their home in Omaha, Nebraska. “She was only too happy to take me to the movies all the time,” he says. It was during those excursions as a toddler that Payne first fell in love with motion pictures. Soon, young Payne aspired to be a projectionist and collected silent films to show on his 8mm projector. He also attended local screenings of older movies and scoured television listings for classic films. “Much of my early film education happened in Omaha,” he says.

Since Payne graduated from high school in 1979, his teenage years were spent consuming the great American films of the era, works by directors such as Martin Scorsese, Robert Altman, Milos Forman, Peter Bogdanovich, and Francis Ford Coppola. “Those movies really made me want to make movies,” he says. “To some degree I’m still trying to make ’70s movies.”

Alexander Payne Reflects on the Inspirational Movies of the 1970s

Many of the movies that inspired Alexander Payne were made during the 1970s — a time when there was a significant shift in the style of cinema. “Directors were beginning to really move as far from the traditional classic Hollywood production code as they could. Boundaries were being pushed, and optimism was being replaced with deeply pessimistic work. It wasn’t all happy endings,” stated Flickering Myth’s Tom Jolliffe. “There was most certainly a transition through that decade which saw the gritty cinema of the late ’60s onward, into the birth of the blockbuster as we know it today. There is either a leaning toward socially reflective cinema, or more toward escapist cinema, and around the late ’70s, we saw the transition go from the former to the latter.”

The majority of the highest-grossing movies of the 1970s have stood the test of time and are still popular picks for movie buffs today:

1. *Star Wars* (1977)
2. *Jaws* (1975)
3. *The Exorcist* (1973)
4. *Grease* (1978)
5. *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977)
6. *Superman* (1978)
7. *Smokey and the Bandit* (1977)
8. *The Godfather* (1972)
9. *Saturday Night Fever* (1977)
10. *Rocky* (1976)
11. *Moonraker* (1979)
12. *Alien* (1979)
13. *Rocky II* (1979)
14. *The Sting* (1973)
15. *Jaws 2* (1978)

Payne says, “1970s cinema defined my idea of what an adult commercial American film is — intelligent, human stories told in a modern cinematic vernacular, freer of contrivance and device, and wherein you say bad words and have nudity, and where acting style more approximates the behavior of real life. However, I still love movies from all eras!”

Alexander Payne’s School Days Set the Stage for His Award-Winning Career



Making movies is a work of passion for Alexander Payne, and the inspiration of that passion started in the 70's with the boundary pushing movies that were being made.

Despite his dreams of making Hollywood movies, Alexander Payne's parents made sure he understood the importance of a good education. "I went both to private and public schools. My mother, ever vigilant about education, would switch me from one school to the other if she didn't think the teacher was up to snuff," he says.

"So my generation, the generations before me, if you could, you'd get out of Omaha and go to college elsewhere, usually on the coasts. Not so many people came back," says Payne. After high school, he did the same. He left the Cornhusker State for sunny California. He studied Spanish and history at Stanford University before attending film school at UCLA. However, he's happy to report that "the city of Omaha has blossomed so well since then, it's now the city we never thought it would or could become. It's one of the best-kept-secret cities."

Despite the awards and accolades, Payne confides that *Election* is the movie for which he still receives the most compliments. "Because it's the only one I made that isn't too long," he says. "It has a very good rhythm to it — a brisk, metronome pace. It has a relentless, sharklike narrative drive."

Speaking of *Election*, Payne admits he has a great deal of affection for the film's protagonist, Tracy Flick. "I have a soft spot for all the characters in my movies. She was no exception. You have to distinguish between whether you would like that character as a human being if you knew that person in real life, separate from whether you love this person as a character," says Alexander Payne. "As driven as Tracy Flick was — and her name has entered popular culture as a very driven person — I still wanted to give her understanding and depth. There's a scene in the movie where she's really weeping, and you see how much she's been manipulated by her mother. I hope that stuff even subtly helps explain things. Everyone's got a story," he says.

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