

But can they sell soap?

by BROCK WEIR

When Norman Jewison died this past January at the grand old age of 97, he was remembered as a titan of the film industry ? and rightly so.

His impressive filmography, boasting such ground-breaking and beloved titles as *In the Heat of the Night*, *The Thomas Crown Affair*, *Moonstruck*, *Agnes of God*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and *Fiddler on the Roof*, is a testament to a filmmaker who was not afraid to challenge norms, cross over between genres, and tackle tough topics.

One of my favourite Norman Jewison pictures, however, was one that barely made a ripple in the countless tributes paid to the director in the aftermath of his passing. It's not particularly surprising as easy, breezy comedies aren't put on quite the same pedestal as a film like *In the Heat of the Night*, which is still held up as an exemplar of the time, place and politics in which it was created.

Nevertheless, it has a special place in my heart.

The Thrill of It All is a 1963 comedy starring Doris Day and James Garner as an ?average? American couple with two young children ? well, as ?average? as one can be with a live-in maid. Garner is Gerald Boyer, a successful obstetrician while Day is Beverly, his homemaker wife, who, by her own admission, has few outlets for fulfilment outside of her children, the PTA, and ketchup-making.

Their calm, cool and collected world, however, is turned upside down when a chance encounter at a dinner party with an industrialist lands Beverly a role as the television pitchwoman for *Happy Soap*. Her accessible delivery of the sponsor's message each week on television is wildly successful, due largely to her everywoman approach: simply telling viewers how she used the *Happy* family of products.

Eventually, her meteoric rise causes tension in the household and insecurity with her husband, as she's not only bringing home the bacon but becoming a household name ? to the detriment of her ?wifely duties.? (I know, I know, but it was 1963 after all)

As much as the film was a product of its time, it was, in many ways, somewhat prescient. Written satirically by Carl Reiner, the story shows how pervasive getting ?the message? just right was in practically every facet of Beverly's life, as the company gives her just about every product to try out and, therefore, pitch to the masses.

In many ways, Day's Beverly Boyer could be seen as a forerunner to today's influencers. Although she lucked into the role, it very quickly overran her life and, unavoidably, almost came to define her.

I've watched with fascination over the years as friends and acquaintances have, as social media has continued its unceasing reach, chased the influencer dream and hit many similar pitfalls. For some, it's a matter of gaining more online clout for the greater goal of boosting their own business or their own brand of whatever. For others, it's been a matter of chasing some sort of ephemeral fame. For others still, it's been a matter of simply trying to get free stuff from companies, brands and businesses that are looking for cheap and easy promos and piggy-backing off existing online followers.

(In the interest of full disclosure, an Instagram site I co-curate with two friends in the United States, has garnered me advance copies of two books related to our subject matter, but two books do not an influencer make)

One acquaintance, for instance, seems rather keen on getting those highly lucrative ?micro-sponsorships? no matter what the product is, within reason. They have spent the last couple of years documenting just about every product they've purchased by posting said products on social media, tagging the company, hoping for a bit of that brand magic to rain down.

Another recently went on vacation to several countries in South Asia. While I enjoyed their Instagram photo-logue immensely, and it did indeed whet my appetite to visit many of these places, their quest to land a product endorsement and create videos with just the right ingredients to go 'viral' appeared to take an inordinate amount of time and effort out of that trip that was just supposed to be about rest and relaxation.

Waterfalls were indeed being chased, but dancing under the spray to an appropriately chosen Rihanna track plugging their camera, the brand of swimwear they're sporting, and anything but an umbrella, seems rather laborious when on holiday.

Maybe I'm old fashioned, but the trip appeared to be more work than play and that was a shame ? but I wish them every success.

Another still went 'viral' recently when a TikTok video they created scratched a particular comedy itch. After that initial success and investing what appeared to be a not-insubstantial amount of cash on taking whatever they created to the next level, their meteoric rise appears to have plateaued and now it's a matter of begging existing followers to share their videos to all in sundry in the hope of catching lightning in a bottle once again ? and presumably getting a return on their A/V investment.

This type of chase has never really appealed to me, but I do understand it. It sells, its lucrative and, even if it's not especially lucrative, it could help make ends meet.

Yet, for many of us, talking about ourselves and, by extension, promoting ourselves, is a somewhat uncomfortable experience. We know who we are, we know what we do well, and we know what we need to get into the next level.

Maybe it's a generational thing. While I suspect some members of the generations that have grown up with social media as inextricable part of their lives would still prefer to talk about anything but themselves, they have, by contrast, come up in a time where self-promotion and this quest for something as elusive as influence is a part of their everyday life. Perhaps it's perceived as one of the primary ways to get ahead in this world.

Don't get me wrong, there is absolutely nothing wrong with it, but when it veers close to becoming the defining part of your identity, that's where things can get a little bit dicey ? and, in an arena as highly polarized and anonymous as social media, it can also lead to your followers seeing you as public property rather than private individuals, beholden to them for clicks in exchange for giving away more and more of yourself.

Beverly Boyer got out of the Happy Soap game after becoming public property, unable to go out for a quiet dinner with her husband without being hounded for autographs and 'talking shop' and having more and more of her life owned and operated by the conglomerate.

I do wonder if the influencers of today will reach the point of wanting to claw themselves back or, in the quest for influence, they will continue to fill the insatiable beast, themselves become the product, without turning back.