

MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY

Memorandum

To: Sheriff William N. Morris Jr.

From: Charles F. Holmes

Subject: Movie previewed

Date: Jan. 9, 1969

The film, "Uptight," by Paramount Films was obviously a Negro cast adaptation of the 1930's film, "The Informer," which brought Victor McLachlan to popularity. Unfortunately, this new film is not as good as the other, with inferior acting and an unclear purpose. Also unfortunately, the film-makers pegged the film on the emotions of the country wrought by the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King in Memphis. When you test the film's merit by asking yourself 'What is its purpose?' you can only observe, I believe, that its purpose was to hang a poor film on a tragedy and make money. The plot in the "Informer" was a revolution based on political differences with the Irish revolutionaries wanting freedom from England. "Uptight," then, would seem in a muddled way to be promoting revolution, based on racial rather than political reasons, by the Negroes of America against the whites. The film definitely makes the police the villain and canonizes Tommy Wells as a hero of the Negro neighborhood because he is a fugitive after killing a warehouse guard during a theft. The film popularizes disobedience of the law and separation of the races.

It would probably be very popular with the militant Negro youth, possibly even inciting to them, but an effort to stop its showing might create more of a furor than the film is worth, in my opinion.

Riot

DRAMA
97M.

Paramount
(Rating: "R")

ESTIMATE: Drama of unleashed aggressions in prison situation is strong stuff.

CAST: Jim Brown, Gene Hackman, Ben Carruthers, Mike Kellin, Gerald O'Loughlin, Clifford David, Bill Walker, Ricky Summers. Produced by William Castle; directed by Buzz Kulik.

STORY: Guard Gerald O'Loughlin becomes suspicious of convict Jim Brown and drags him before the deputy warden (the warden is in Honolulu on vacation), who orders him confined to isolation. As O'Loughlin opens the door to the isolation cells, the prisoners, who have gotten hold of the keys and have been awaiting this moment, pour out, and the riot is on. Brown grabs O'Loughlin and helps to lock up eight members of the prison personnel (including the deputy warden and the prison psychologist), thus becoming involved in the outbreak. The original plan is to keep the uprising confined to the isolation group and to break out of jail, but something goes wrong and the general alarm is sounded. Gene Hackman, the convict leader, comes up with the plan: "We're gonna crash out of here . . . We're gonna make them think it's somethin' else—a protest for better conditions . . ." Ben Carruthers, a wild-eyed, shiv-happy Indian, wants to kill O'Loughlin, but Hackman stops him. When Carruthers pulls a knife on Hackman, Brown slugs him. Hackman tells Brown not to lock Carruthers up because they need him to lead them through the mountains after they escape. When one of the captive guards has a heart attack, the prison doctor is allowed to remove him to the infirmary. Hackman warns the guards on the prison wall that if they shoot, the hostages will be murdered. Brown's natural leadership and good sense and the respect in which he is held cause the others to turn to him. As the news of the rebellion spreads through the prison, the situation threatens to get out of hand. Brown engineers the production and distribution of vats of "raisin-jack" to get the cons drunk and out of the way while the original group works secretly day and night to complete the tunnel that will take them to freedom. Brown stands off a mob of murderous prisoners who want to get at the hostages and finally moves the group to a remote corner of the prison. The raisin-jack turns the prison into a jungle where the "queens' row" denizens throw a wild drag

party. The men have broken into the files and are reading the reports to find out who the "finks" are. They set up a kangaroo court and brutally beat the offenders. Throughout, Brown is the cool head. When Carruthers persists in going after the imprisoned hostages, Brown locks him in a cell. The warden announces his return (Frank Eyman, warden of Arizona State Prison, plays himself), and Hackman and Brown realize they have to push full speed ahead if they are going to get away. When word comes through that the tunnel diggers have come up outside the prison, they prepare to go. As Carruthers, Hackman, and Brown are about to follow the others, homosexual Clifford David appears and insists on coming along. Carruthers bloodily knifes him, and the three enter the tunnel. But the guards on the wall have been on the lookout; those emerging from the tunnel are mowed down by machine-guns. Then the tunnel is gassed. Only Carruthers, Hackman, and Brown make it back. While the guards are busy quelling the men inside the prison, the three make their way through a steam pipe tunnel to a guard tower. Carruthers knifes the guard, then goes after Brown. Hackman knifes Carruthers to save Brown, who slides down a rope to safety. Carruthers, before he dies, slices Hackman's fingers and the rope, and Hackman falls to his death. Brown is the only one to escape, and the film terminates with the statement that he is still at large.

X-RAY: Producer William Castle's predilection for the horror genre is quite apparent in "Riot." Though not a horror film, "Riot" is not for the queasy. It's pretty strong stuff most of the time, dealing as it does with the suddenly released aggressions of a group of men who have lived under the often brutal discipline of a maximum security prison. There are bloody knifings, bloody beatings, bloody fights. A lot of footage is devoted to the transvestite gaiety and abandon of "Queens' Row," with bumps and grinds by a bikini-clad con with a tattooed arm. Jim Brown reveals so many sterling qualities as the prisoner Cully that his successful escape seems in the nature of a happy ending. Brown (one-time pro footballer with the Cleveland Browns) does a tight and competent job; Hackman is fine as Red; but Carruthers is a sour note in a practically caricatured characterization of the Indian Surefoot. "Riot" was made at Arizona State Prison—the first motion picture to be filmed in an operating penal institution. With the exception of eight professional actors, the cast is made up of members of the prison. They turn in remarkably professional performances—as does Warden Eyman. The screenplay by James Poe is based on the novel, "The Riot," by Frank Elli, who wrote it while serving time in prison. The impact of the film is somewhat diluted by the multiplicity of its themes—homosexuality, the murderousness of Carruthers, negotiations for improved conditions, construction of the tunnel, Brown's dream wherein he envisions himself at a swimming pool surrounded by brown beauties, the kangaroo court, and so on. The spectrum is too wide, and as a result, the film loses some of its dramatic intensity. Christopher Komeda, who did the musical theme for "Rosemary's Baby," has composed a suitably tense background score and also the music for the folk-type song, "100 Years," for which Robert Wells wrote the lyrics. The picture opens with the song, and it is threaded throughout the film as a kind of transitional device. The film bears no relationship to the play of the same name which opened Thursday (19) in New York.

—Elsa