

The Alleged Texas Cheerleader-Murdering Mom

4-27-1993

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "The Alleged Texas Cheerleader-Murdering Mom" (1993). *On Sport and Society*. 235.
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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
April 27, 1993

Over a year and one-half ago a classic American drama unfolded in Channelview, Texas, where Wanda Holloway, 37, was tried for attempted murder. The charge was that Wanda tried to hire a hit man to kill Verna Heath whose daughter Amber was pushing Shanna Holloway, Wanda's little girl, to defeat in the school cheerleading competition. This was a story that touched the hearts of all Americans.

Who could fail to identify with Wanda Holloway, the good mother, who was willing to risk her future in order to ensure that her daughter would live out the dream of all American girls. To be a cheerleader is no small thing in America, and in Texas to be a cheerleader is a very big thing.

You knew and I knew at the time that this was an ideal made-for-TV movie, and several months ago it became so, in a cheap, shallow, and unimaginative ABSleaze epic. What we didn't know was that it would also become an excellent and insightful film offering an off-centered slice of American life.

Playing on HBO Cable this month, and no doubt to be made available later on video, "The Positively True Adventures of the Alleged Texas Cheerleader-Murdering Mom," is a wonderful portrait of the American dream just slightly out of focus. There is nothing more fascinating than watching people earnestly pursue an absurd course with the tenacity of a politician in heat. Director Michael Ritchie has achieved this with flair, humor, and a jaundiced eye, replicating his achievement in his earlier film, "Smile."

In "Smile" Ritchie focused his cameras on the dark and sleazy side of beauty pageants, and had the genius to cast Bruce Dern as the M.C. of one such small town pageant. In "Cheerleader-Murdering Mom" Ritchie has cast Holly Hunter in the lead as Wanda Holloway. If cable movies were eligible for Oscar nominations, Holly Hunter would already have next year's best actress award in the bag. Her Texas accent spit out in a machine gun manner, clipped and abrupt, along with her body language and attitude are both energetic and hypnotic.

Wanda Holloway is played with brilliance as a working class woman moving up the social ladder, resentful of those moving with her or faster than her, and determined to walk through the

slights, while achieving her dreams of success through her daughter Shanna. In this case the Holy Grail of Texas teenage feminine existence is at stake, and Wanda is determined that Shanna will have it.

As Wanda sees the prize slipping away she turns to her ex-brother-in-law, Terry Harper, played with great skill by Beau Bridges. Harper is your basic Texas low life. Laborer, petty thief, loser, and married to the unstable Maria Harper whom he abuses. Maria Harper is played with convincing manic manner by Swoosie Kurtz. Terry is approached by Wanda about the possibility of hiring a hit man to take out Verna Heath, the mother, or Amber Heath, the cheerleader, or both. Worried that he could be set up, Harper goes to the police, a less than savory lot themselves, and the result is that Harper is wired to tape the evidence on Wanda.

If the premise sounds bizarre, it is nothing compared to what comes after the arrest. Almost everyone instantly senses the potential of this case as the media circus begins. Newspapers, magazines, talk shows on radio and TV, the sleaze TV magazine shows, comedians, are all discussing the case within days of the indictment. The ultimate is reached when Johnny Carson uses the story in his monologue. Wanda takes it all in with her wounded daughter. Verna Heath one of the intended victims begins to keep a scrapbook, and Wanda's ex-husband, who calculates everything in personal cash flow, begins to negotiate the movie rights.

Along the way director Michael Ritchie and writer Jane Anderson offer a commentary on the banality of small town life and the not-so-quiet desperation of a number of its inmates. It is done with a deft touch and some extremely clever humor.

At one point with Wanda at the local Baptist church playing the piano, the pastor asks the congregation to pray, "for any of our parishioners who are sick, troubled, or indicted." By this time of course Wanda Holloway is all three, while many of those involved in this case qualify for prayer on at least two counts.

The most striking thing about the story is the intensity of feeling surrounding the quest for cheerleader status. At one point Wanda explains that this is a very significant career move for Shanna, it could lead to a college scholarship, a modeling career, and who knows what from there. The emotional investment by the two mothers in the lives of their daughters is massive and frightening. The class-consciousness emanating in no particular direction gives an added edge to the film's tension.

Although based on a true story, this is clearly a docu-drama, a cautionary tale about the significance of this central female role in the American sportsworld. It truly is an archetypal American sports story.

If Wanda Holloway was guilty of anything it was that she loved her daughter too much, she understood the value of cheerleading as an adolescent career move, and the true significance of Sport in America.

Wouldn't we all have done the same for our children?

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