

Southern Comfort

Alabama in 1957 was a green land of limestone and second-growth forest, of slow hot summers and sprawling peanut fields that breathed a salubrious indolence.

(We called peanuts goober peas, as is proper.) Alabama was then its own place. The accent was slow and sweet as sorghum dripping on cornbread (which people in fact ate), a lilting and calming influence that kept the language from falling over itself in undue hurry. The memory of Sherman still gripped the South. When I arrived from Virginia as a kid of 11, the other kids called me “that damn Yankee on the corner” until I learned to swathe words in cushioning syllables.

Alabama pretty much belonged to the Alabamans, which did not then seem a disturbing idea.

I lived in Athens, very much a small town and a vertex of the Huntsville-Decatur-Athens triangle. My father was a mathematician at the Army Ballistic Missile Agency in Huntsville. We had little money because, until Sputnik went up later in the year, mathematicians were not esteemed in America. My parents came to Athens because they loathed the North with its hurry and ill manners and no sense of the past.

Kids then spent the summer barefoot, not because they couldn't afford shoes but because it was free and comfortable. Attitudes were Southern. Folks were courteous and friendly, but if you pushed them too hard you could end up wishing you hadn't. People pretty much made up their own minds what they would allow within their ambit. Kids walked to the town square where the Limestone Drugstore was and sat unshod within to read comics. The owner, Coochie, an elderly

redhead, didn't care. It was his store. There was then no federal nanny in the Yankee Capital to tell us that feet were a health hazard. I do not remember an outbreak of plague.

For two glorious years I lived as a Huck Finn simulacrum. Only later did I realize how wonderful it had been. Come a summer morning, I set out with the equipment of boyhood, a fielder's mitt and a BB gun. I came back for supper. My mother didn't care because nothing much could happen to you in Athens.

The family dog too went out when she wanted, went where she wanted, and came back when she was ready. I do not remember that any deaths resulted from this dangerous practice.

Kids all had BB guns. Most had the \$4.50 Red Ryder model, but I had managed to get the Daisy Eagle with the plastic yet somewhat functioning telescopic sight. BBs were sold everywhere, a nickel for a pack of perhaps a hundred. I will always remember the glinting arc of the BB across the sky as it left the barrel, the eye for elevation and Kentucky windage that made us dead shots at 11. No one thought that BB guns were bad. I do not remember BB-induced legions of dead and crippled, of maimed and halt.

I used to go down to where a rusting iron footbridge crossed the swamp near the Valley Gin Company. In the North, gin is vodka made insufferable by the addition of juniper juice. In the South, it was a place that removed seeds from cotton. Beneath the bridge a stream

sparkled, occasionally leaping with schools of minnows being chased by something hungry.

In the sunlight, swamp plants glowed luminous green as if lit from within and dragonflies whizzed about. We called them snake doctors, as one should, though in some parts they are known as skeeter hawks or the devil's darnin' needles. In the solitude I shot at them but could never hit them. They were fearsome things, iridescent blue and green, and looked as if they should sting. They didn't.

Occasionally—oh, glory!—a cottonmouth rested against a pipe that lay submerged by the current, and we got a shot at it. One summer I killed 13, than which life don't get no better. No one thought I needed a hunting license, adult supervision, armor, or snake-loss counselling. I was just a towheaded kid with a BB gun. It was an explanation that satisfied everyone.

On days when the sun would have baked the brains of anyone but a small boy, we straggled to the Limestone to read comics. Boys piled their mitts and BB guns in a corner, grabbed sheaves of Plastic Man and Batman and Green Lantern from the comic rack, and adjourned for hours to marble-topped tables. I don't think anyone ever bought a comic at the Limestone. The pages slowly crumbled. The store couldn't have made much money on our cherry cokes and chocolate cokes (and, so help me, there was a tomato coke). Coochie just liked kids.

It couldn't happen now. Corporate wouldn't approve. But Coochie was corporate. People pretty much made up their own minds about their lives then. It seemed reasonable to me. It still does. ■

Arts & Letters

FILM

[*Being Julia*, *Stage Beauty*,
Team America]

The World's A Stage

By Steve Sailer

IN OCTOBER, three films about stage actors debut. Annette Bening plays a leading lady of the 1930s West End in "Being Julia"; Billy Crudup portrays the last youth to appear as Desdemona before King Charles II legalized actresses in the 1660s in "Stage Beauty"; and Trey Parker of "South Park" notoriety provides the voice of the "best actor on Broadway," who uses his thespian skills to infiltrate terrorist gangs in the R-rated marionette movie "Team America: World Police."

"Being Julia" is based on the 1937 W. Somerset Maugham novel *Theatre*. The plot was later borrowed by "All About Eve," although here there's a happy ending. An aging star who doesn't have much of a self when she's offstage idly begins an affair with a very young American social-climber, only to lose him and her complaisant husband (Jeremy Irons), to a devious ingénue who intends to upstage Julia in their new production. Yet while Julia may be over the hill in the bedroom, she remains the grandmistress on the boards. On opening night, she amusingly puts her young rival in her place.

"Being Julia" offers a flashy acting-for-the-sake-of-acting role that has Oscar written all over it. Sadly, I don't think

Bening, who was nominated for "The Grifters" and "American Beauty," quite delivers. Perhaps that's because she's not very much like her competitive character. Certainly, many actresses are shallow, grasping careerists, yet a surprising number really are as womanly as they appear on screen, proving it by sacrificing their late thirties, when their careers would normally peak, to having children. The 46-year-old Bening, for example, gave her husband Warren Beatty four babies between 1992 and 2000.

Movie stars are normally terrible at playing the opposite sex because the reason they are stars is that they so exemplify their own sex. Remember "Tootsie"? It was a symposium on character acting by Bill Murray, Charles Durning, and Jessica Lange, but Dustin Hoffman couldn't pass as a woman in the eyes of the drunkest sailor in Subic Bay.

The delicately featured Billy Crudup isn't quite a star—he's best known as the 1970s guitar god in "Almost Famous"—but he doesn't make a persuasive woman either in the interesting but slightly quease-inducing "Stage Beauty." That the rugged Duke of Buckingham would find him an acceptable female substitute, even in Desdemona drag, seems unlikely. Part of the problem is that Crudup is 36 while the historical figure he's playing, Edward Kynaston, was only 21 when the King ended his transvestite career.

John Derbyshire tells me that he constantly gets e-mails from homosexuals asserting that every famous individual in history was one of their fraternity: Johann Sebastian Bach? The only reason he fathered 20 children, honey, was to cover up his being as gay as a French horn. Yet much of the homosexuality actually recorded by history appears to have been radically different from modern

"egalitarian" homosexuality. It was opportunistic, exploitative, often ped-erastic, as it remains today in the Middle East. Indeed, many of the famous personages that homosexuals like to call their own later matured into heterosexuality, which contemporary gays claim is impossible.

Kynaston, for instance, returned to play Othello, married, and had children. In "Stage Beauty," it's pleasing to see Crudup reclaim the masculinity that his cruel apprenticeship had buried by making his comeback as the manly Moor of Venice. Still, for him to introduce Restoration audiences to method acting by portraying Othello as a 17th-century Stanley Kowalski is a head-scratching anachronism.

In the puppet picture "Team America: World Police," young Gary Johnston is slaying Broadway audiences in "Lease: The Musical" with his show-stopping protest number "Everyone Has AIDS." A top-secret antiterrorist commando squad recruits him to worm his way into a Chechen operation buying WMD in Cairo. He succeeds, but his comrades, while in hot pursuit, accidentally blow up the Sphinx and the Great Pyramid. When Alec Baldwin, head of the Film Actors Guild, protests Team America's destructiveness, North Korea's sinister (but Elmer Fudd-like) Kim Jong Il invites the lefty members of F.A.G. to a Pyongyang "peace" conference to further his fiendish plot.

While quite funny, be aware that "Team America's" language is brutally filthy because the "South Park" guys graphically spell out the buried meanings of common obscenities, which originated in those bad old days of predatory bisexuality that poor Kynaston survived. Don't be fooled by the puppets: keep your kids away. ■