

# Arts & Letters

## FILM

[Yes]

### Film in Rhyme? Yes, It's Time

By Steve Sailer

MOLIÈRE'S BOURGEOIS GENTLEMAN was famously delighted to learn he had been speaking prose all his life. Yet as historian Jacques Barzun noted in *From Dawn to Decadence*, "His surprise is well-founded ... What he spoke all his life was *not* prose, but speech. Prose is the written form of deliberate expression ... It is as artificial as verse."

Nor should a modern gentleman assume he is speaking "dialogue," because what screenwriters are paid large sums to contrive is barely more authentic than quatrains would be. I recall a 1994 radio interview with Steve Barancik, the painfully shy writer of the snazzy film noir "Last Seduction," which starred Linda Fiorentino as the ultimate femme fatale. The perky interviewer asked him if he comes up with all those killer replies in real life. "Well, sure," the author stammered, "In my car ... on the ... way home."

Cinema's visuals are constantly evolving, but its dialogue is deteriorating. Why write eloquent English when it's just going to wind up translated into Turkish and Tagalog to serve as wadding between detonations?

It's time for something different, and Sally Potter's film "Yes" is a gloriously reactionary step backwards.

Shortly after 9/11, Potter, who is best known for her 1992 adaptation of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, began composing a scene illustrating the clash of civilizations between an Arab immigrant and a wealthy Western woman. She recalled, "The argument between the two lovers came out onto the page, for the most part, in iambic pentameter (ten syllables per line) ... Perhaps it was an instinctive attempt to let the characters speak to each other on screen about things which are hard to express in normal conversation."

The screenplay ended up as rhyme of the most conspicuous kind: couplets. The expert actors in "Yes"—led by three-time Oscar-nominee Joan Allen, the tall, severely blonde actress from Chicago's famed Steppenwolf Theatre Company—play it like Shakespearean blank verse, pausing at the end of sentences rather than at the end of lines, but the constant rhyming won't let us forget it's verse.

Because it's poetry, the dialogue cannot even pretend to be realistic. This frees the characters to articulate impossibly literary lines that don't sound any more implausible than their most banal statements.

Many will hate "Yes," but I found it delightful, reminiscent of the pleasures of a musical. I hope Potter makes another verse film, allowing her actors to stress the rhymes. This movie's high point comes when Potter permits Sheila Hancock, who plays Allen's dying Communist aunt, to read her witty voice-over monologue as heroic couplets, blending Alexander Pope with Dr. Seuss: "Oh, you'll be sorry when I'm dead / I'm only joking, dear. I only said / That for a laugh. Although of course it's true."

In prose, Potter sounds like a doctrinaire leftist, but in verse she's more con-

tent to let her characters each have their say, airing issues that are more visible than discussed.

Allen—like many contemporary actresses, such as Nicole Kidman and Cate Blanchett—is extremely fair, and her character's olive-skinned Arab beau repeatedly admits that their difference in coloration both attracts and annoys him. Indeed, "Yes" and Potter's earlier "Tango Lesson" illustrate anthropologist Peter Frost's new book *Fair Women, Dark Men*, which documents that this cultural preference has been found in most societies. Apparently, this is because women actually are "the fair sex," being slightly paler on average.

The man, a surgeon from shattered Beirut who can only find work as a chef in London, eventually realizes that his Muslim masculine pride can no longer tolerate being an invisible man. He demands of his mistress, a celebrated American embryologist, "From Elvis to Eminem, Warhol's art; / I know your stories, know your songs by heart. / But do you know mine?"

No, and like the rest of us, Potter's heroine isn't going to try to learn. Rather than offer to accompany her homesick lover back to Beirut for a visit, she demands he come with her to Havana, of all places, where she plans to bask in nostalgia for her late aunt's radicalism. I'm not sure Potter realizes what an awful person her adulterous heroine is.

Ironically, Cuba turns out, due to Castro's stultifying tyranny, to look like a well-preserved slice of the Eisenhower era, full of '57 Chevys and Hemingway-worshippers. Potter doesn't quite get the joke, but at least her artistic daring makes up for her tedious politics. ■

Rated R for language and some sexual content.

## BOOKS

[*Black Rednecks and White Liberals*, Thomas Sowell, Encounter Books, 372 pages]

## Don't Blame the Rednecks

By David Gordon

THOMAS SOWELL has throughout his long career manifested a rare ability to challenge leftist dogma with inconvenient facts. Blinded by false views of the past, self-certified do-gooders worsen the problems they endeavor to ameliorate. "Nowhere," Sowell tells us, "has history been more in thrall to belief systems—visions—than in the history of racial and ethnic groups. Too often the past has been twisted to fit the visions and the agendas of the present." One such agenda especially concerns him. "Much of the history written about minority groups has in fact been a history of how others have treated these groups, more than a history of these groups themselves."

Sowell's battle against false visions appears in part to be motivated by an urgent practical concern about American blacks, although *Black Rednecks and White Liberals* ranges widely over other ethnic groups as well. Liberals see blacks in the United States a victims of the "legacy of slavery" and discrimination. If blacks fare less well than whites in education, income, and employment, the fault lies with the majority group. It is whites, not blacks, who must act, by massively increased welfare programs and affirmative-action schemes.

For Sowell, the fate of blacks lies principally in their own hands, through scholastic achievement and hard work. In taking this stance, he confronts head-on an entrenched dogma. Do not the educational problems of blacks stem

from the evils of segregation, only recently and imperfectly overcome? Our author dissents:

Despite the Supreme Court's pronouncement in the historic 1954 case of *Brown v. Board of Education* that racially separate schools 'are inherently unequal,' there have been many predominantly or wholly minority schools whose test score were at or above the national average. The average IQ at Dunbar High School was 111 in 1939 and again in 1950. Ironically, Dunbar was within walking distance of the Supreme Court which in effect declared its existence impossible.

Sowell does not write as an advocate of segregation—far from it. His point, rather, is that Dunbar was not unique. Many black schools and colleges have achieved a high level of excellence through their own efforts. "Why this ignoring or dismissing of examples of black educational success? Sometimes the reason is ideological." Successful all-black schools raise uncomfortable issues. "To say that mixing and matching racial groups is not a prerequisite for quality education would call into question the decades-long school busing struggle, which might then been seen in retrospect as a costly and divisive wild goose chase, and questions might be raised about the current mantra of 'diversity.'"

To this, one might object that from the fact that some black schools have by their own efforts been successful, it hardly follows that all or most can. True enough; but Sowell can with justice respond that we have at least some reason to hope for good results. He enlists in support of his thesis a surprising witness. "Even Arthur Jensen, the leading proponent of the theory of genetic racial differences in IQ, has said that among 'the disadvantaged' there are 'high school students who have failed to learn basic skills that they could have learned many years earlier' if taught in different ways."

Unfortunately, Sowell's common-sense approach is controversial in our topsy-turvy world. Sowell does not conceal his indignation with those who advocate "authentic" black culture. In this view, anyone who abandons the practices common in the black ghetto is condemned as surrendering to white values. Among these inauthentic values is academic study, and young blacks face "the overhanging threat of being accused of 'acting white' if they devote themselves to their studies, instead of to various social activities in which other black students indulge."

Sowell's laudable desire to combat the excesses of authenticity leads him in one respect to overreach. Would he not have a formidable weapon against his opponents if it transpired that the "authentic" black culture he condemns was itself not genuinely black? He yields to temptation: black ghetto culture derives from the Southern redneck form of life.

More is involved here than a mere parallel between blacks and Southern whites. What is involved is a common subculture that goes back for centuries, which has encompassed everything from ways of talking to attitudes toward education, violence, and sex—and which originated not in the South, but in those parts of the British Isles from which white Southerners came.

Those who spurn education as "white" are unconsciously echoing the prejudices that Southern rednecks imbibed from their Scottish and borderlands ancestors.

Sowell has next to nothing to say about the rednecks' attitudes towards education. He includes a mention of "neglect of education" on a list of cultural traits "prevalent among Southern whites"; a footnote refers to several authors but offers little discussion. To point out, as he does, that 20 percent of Southern whites were illiterate according to the census of 1850, is to invite the obvious query, what about the 80 percent who were not?