

# Arts & Letters

## FILM

[Something New]

### Guess Who's Coming to Landscape?

By Steve Sailer

DURING AN ACADEMY AWARDS season when we're pestered to pretend we admire liberal fantasies like "Brokeback Mountain"—in which he-man Heath Ledger plays the straightest gay ever—it's refreshing that the unheralded "Something New" honestly explores a genuine social issue—the dire marital prospects of the upper-middle-class black woman—with insight and no political axes to grind.

"Something New" is burdened with perhaps the most forgettable title since the straight-to-landfill 1979 Joe Mantegna film "To Be Announced," yet it proves one of the more acutely observed romantic comedies of recent years. It's not exceptionally funny, but as a lively social study, "Something New" is a small but worthy addition to the genre pioneered by Jane Austen.

Kenya McQueen is an offspring of the traditional black high bourgeoisie, that reclusive and starchy class from which Condoleezza Rice emerged. Armed with a Stanford law degree and a Wharton MBA, she's up for partner at a corporate law firm and has just bought a house in Baldwin Hills, the black Beverly Hills. All she's missing is a backyard garden to

relax in during her few hours away from the office ... and a boyfriend.

Like so many affluent black women today, she can't find a black man of comparable status. At Harvard Law School, for instance, black women now outnumber black men three to one. Moreover, according to the 2000 census, black men are 2.65 times more likely to have a white wife than a black woman is to have a white husband. Because interracial marriage skims off so many of the most eligible black bachelors, African-American women—like Asian-American men, who face a mirror-image dating disparity—have become increasingly opposed to intermarriage.

Kenya's brittle attitude doesn't help her search either. Every time she's out with her girlfriends—also educated, attractive, and unattached—she ends up itemizing what they call The List of the seven not-so-minor prerequisites she demands in a man.

My 1997 article "Is Love Colorblind?" was the first look at the frustrations that interracial marriage causes both black women and Asian men. In response, I've received over the years several hundred e-mails, often quite eloquent, from women like Kenya offering their own views and experiences. The film's portrayal of the heroine rang true.

The script by Kriss Turner, a black woman who writes for Chris Rock's sitcom, is also admirable for how it handles the career subplot. Making partner depends upon how well she handles a major client's CEO, who is paying for a *pro forma* "due diligence" analysis of an acquisition he passionately wants to make. Most movies would concoct a bogus "social conscience" plot twist for the heroine to wrestle with, such as her shocking discovery that the target firm clubs baby seals. Instead, "Something

New" offers a realistic problem, the kind of test of personal integrity that happens far more often in business: Kenya unearths evidence that the target firm would be a disastrous investment, but that's the last thing her client wants to hear.

Meanwhile, a friend sets her up on a blind date to meet a Brian at the Magic Johnson Starbucks. Brian turns out to be handsome, witty, and laidback. He is, however, very white. (He's portrayed by Simon Baker, yet another Australian leading man who can do a perfect American accent.) Adding to her discomfort, he can read her emotions. He knows she's racially prejudiced, while he's not, and he is rather amused by her predicament. So she ducks out after five tense minutes.

But when Kenya asks an acquaintance about finding a landscape contractor, the small businessman she's sent is Brian. Eventually, after many plausible complications, love blooms among her backyard's new bougainvillea.

And that's when the trouble really starts. Love stories require resistance from society to be interesting, and "Something New" isn't lacking. Strikingly, almost all the objections come from blacks. Her mother and brother are rude to Brian because he's white and lower middle class. And Brian begins to tire of her kvetching about race. Then her brother introduces her to an IBM ("Ideal Black Man"): a well-bred black lawyer, played by Blair Underwood ("LA Law") in the suave manner of Billy Dee Williams endorsing Colt 45 malt liquor.

The happy ending won't surprise anybody, but it's fun to see a movie, for once, where the white guy has more soul than the black guy. ■

Rated PG-13 for sexual references.

## BOOKS

[*Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*, Tony Judt, Penguin, 896 pages]

# Daydream of a United Europe

By James P. Pinkerton

TONY JUDT LOVES EUROPE. He is sad when his continent is wounded and divided, he is happy when it is healing and prospering. In *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*, Judt outlines a vision for a harmonious Europe. It's a long shot, he acknowledges, but when he hopes for a continent united by culture and tradition, he is summoning up an ancient ideal: a United West. At a time when Europe is under grave threat from the East, it's a goal that makes more sense than ever—even if it seems harder than ever to achieve.

By West, Judt means the European Whole, from Britain to the Bosphorus to the Baltic. He is disdainful of those historians who wrote off Eastern Europe after 1945, either because they assumed that communism was the happy “end of history” or because they simply couldn't be bothered to set their horizons east of London or Paris.

There probably aren't too many humanities professors at New York University who prefer the cautious pastel politics of 20th-century Christian Democrats to the vivid utopianism of grander unelected ideologues, but Judt is one. He is pleased that an “irenical, pacific continent had risen, ‘Phoenix-like,’ from the ashes of its murderous—suicidal—past.” And for the London-born Judt, author or co-author of 10 previous books about European issues and ideas, the story is personal. Disdaining the soulless “master narratives” of historical hedgehogs, Judt tells his story fox-like: he knows many things, from

the Chetniks to Chernobyl to Charter 77 to Christian Dior.

He also knows his is a grim tale, especially at the beginning. Judt reminds us, first of all, of the scale of World War II's destruction. In addition to the 36 million Europeans killed during the conflict—the equivalent of the total population of France—millions more were displaced; in September 1944, 7.5 million foreigners lived inside the German Reich—not many of them by choice. Indeed, the two main Euro-malefactors, Germany and the Soviet Union, expelled or exiled some 30 million people during the war and a similar number in the aftermath years.

And while Judt is mindful of the unique horror of the Holocaust, he makes plain that for many Soviet citizens, life under the Nazis was better than life under the communists. He quotes one Soviet woman as saying that none of her fellow citizens complained about being forced to work in German industry: “For all of them,” she declared, “that was the only possibility of getting out of the Soviet Union.” Of course, as Judt notes with proper outrage, most of these unfortunates—along with many pre-war Russian émigrés, who had never been Soviet citizens—were shipped back to the USSR, where they faced a firing squad or Siberia.

Relentless in his anti-communism, Judt also seeks to honor those who fought against Eastern Europe's descent into captivity, often receiving little help from the West. Heroes such as the anti-communist agrarian leader Nikola Petkov of Bulgaria, shot in 1947, are revered, while the communist commissar Ana Pauker of Romania—who proved her loyalty to Stalin by waving off her own husband as he went to the gulag—are reviled. And in keeping with his theme of European communion, Judt says of the Soviets, “In brutally cutting the Soviet Union adrift from its ties to European history and culture the Bolsheviks did great and lasting damage to Russia.”

Speaking of the Cold War, Judt asserts flatly that it began when the Bolsheviks

took power—that is, not after World War II but after World War I. So he pays brief but solid tribute to the United States for making a revived Europe possible through aid and arms; he admires the humanitarian vision of those Americans who established the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration in 1943—long before the war ended, long before the formal United Nations existed. And American generosity, bolstered by the Marshall Plan, saved millions of lives in the coming decade; the last Displaced Persons camp in West Germany closed in 1957. But Judt appreciates the value of cold steel as well; after pausing over not-so-little details, such as the 73 Allied airmen who died during the Berlin Airlift of 1948-9, he offers a terse but telling treatment of the Red Army threat confronted by Harry Truman and the architects of NATO.

Of particular interest is his take on Yugoslavia, a stance that is free, once again, of the left-wing revisionism that once dominated the American academy. Judt reminds us that Tito and his partisans were simply one bunch of killers among many; he quotes the Yugoslav dissident Milovan Djilas as recalling that rival bands would hike up rocky ravines “to destroy a little group of their countrymen, often neighbors, on some jutting peak six thousand feet high.” Such acts, Djilas concluded, are “what had become of all our theories and visions of the workers' and peasants' struggle against the bourgeoisie.” Once in power, the communists showed no improvement; Judt reminds us that Tito was to Stalin's left when Belgrade and Moscow parted company.

Nor is the author kinder to more recent communists. Mikhail Gorbachev, he declares, was “first a communist and only then a reformer,” who let the Soviet Empire fall apart by accident not design. The true heroes on the eastern side of the Wall, Judt insists, were the early protesters, plus some labor leaders and a few intellectuals. And what of the Polish Pope, John Paul II? Judt takes note of him, and of the Reagan administration