

THE TALKIES



SENTIMENTAL JOURNEYS

by Bruce Bawer

My Sweet Little Village is a sweet little movie, a Capra-esque tribute to village life and virtues courtesy of the Czechoslovakian director Jiri Menzel (*Closely Watched Trains*) and screenwriter Zdenek Sverak. The hero of the film—which is said to be based partly on life in the village where Menzel himself grew up—is the corpulent, middle-aged Pavék (Marian Labuda), who drives a truck for the Mir (Peace) Cooperative Farm in the village of Koutna; his working mate of five years is the village idiot—a winsome young beanpole named Otik Rekosnik (Janos Ban). Together they're a regular Iron-Curtain Laurel and Hardy, with Otik's dimwitted maneuvers constantly landing the exasperated Pavék in hot water or exposing him to his comrades' ridicule. The last straw comes when Pavék—following Otik's directions—backs their truck into a post outside the fancy home of Mr. Rumléna, the village's affluent "Prague weekender." For days Pavék is the butt of local jokes; supremely embarrassed, he insists that after the harvest Otik be teamed with someone else—even though that someone will probably be the cruel Turek, who would make Otik's life hell.

But soon it looks as if the problem has been taken out of local hands: a higher-up in Prague requests Otik's transfer to Metalwood, a factory in the capital. Plainly someone of importance—or with connections—wants Otik out of Koutna. But who? Pavék? Or perhaps Otik's friend Vaclav—an engineer, transplanted urbanite, and boyfriend of Turek's lovely young wife—who has been using Otik's house for romantic assignations and may be attempting to gain title to it? Whatever the case may be, the villagers are worried about Otik's moving to Prague, because they know that he could not

survive there. The city, we are meant to understand, is decadent, indifferent, and amoral, whereas the village is a place where people care about each other. The film ridicules a strident song, "Prague's Calling You," which boasts inanely of the capital's noise and bustle, and contrasts it with the lyrical poems in praise of the countryside that the village doctor (Rudolf Hrusinsky) recites while driving alone in his car. That the doctor—whose wry, humane point of view is essentially equivalent to that of the filmmakers—keeps having car trouble is not just a running gag but a symbol: to a man of his solid, old-fashioned virtues, automobiles will always be alien and uncooperative.

To an extent, the film associates modern decadence not only with the city but with the West. When it turns out that Otik is being called to Prague because the director of Metalwood wants his house for a weekend place, an itinerant artist who has become Otik's roommate derides the director's city-slicker taste for Western accoutrements—for "imported plastic thatching from West Germany" and "an English lawn." Likewise, after Otik reports to Metalwood and shakes the director's hand vigorously, the director tells his secretary, "Bad habit, handshaking. They've given it up in the West." And Menzel mercilessly parodies American movies (one of which Pavék's family eagerly gathers around the TV set to watch), depicting them

as absurdly violent and depraved, crammed with murders and explosions, populated by characters whose only thoughts are of money and sex and drugs. By contrast, positive human values are associated not only with the village but with the cooperative farm—and indeed the film closes on a shot of the farm's main gate, with a large red star looming over it.

But it must be added that *My Sweet Little Village* also pokes fun at its own viewpoint—at the doctor's paeans to the countryside, for example, and at the corny homespun music programs on Czech TV. It also criticizes the use of the word *comrade*. When the itinerant artist, just arrived in the village, addresses an old woman as "aunty," she tells him not to call her by that old-fashioned honorific, or to call her "comrade" either; she prefers "ma'am."

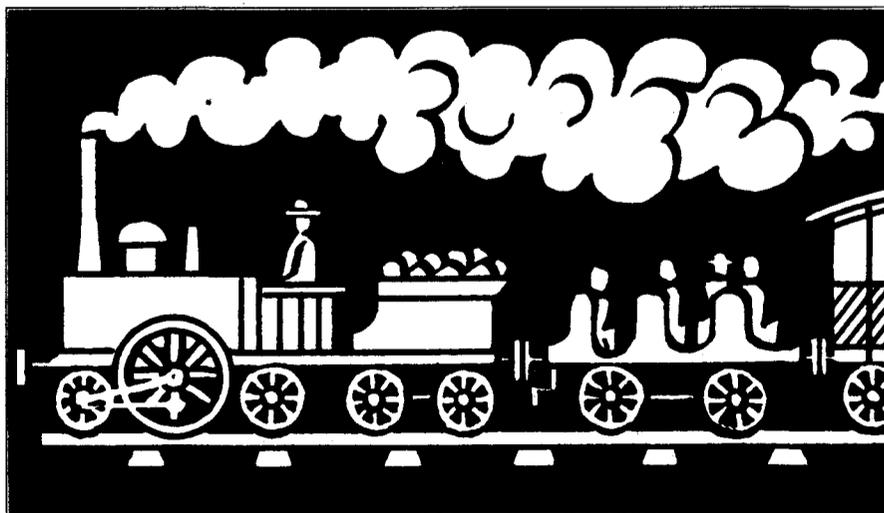
The film is full of small, interesting touches. Pavék's son Jarda, for instance—whose adolescent crush on his sister's teacher forms one of the movie's slighter subplots—wears a University of Utah sweatshirt in one scene. (Curiously, the same shirt appears on another village kid later in the film, causing one to wonder: do the locals pass this prized shirt around, or did the cooperative farm receive an entire shipment of them as a reward for fulfilling production quotas?) And then there is the fact

that Pavék's family lives next door to a graveyard—which is not only a *memento mori*, but a suggestion, I think, that villagers are more conscious of, and more comfortable with, their mortality than city dwellers, and consequently less likely to succumb to a distorted set of values, less likely to forget that people are more important than possessions. Lazarus figures abound: the doctor feels miraculously better soon after his car rolls over him; Turek backs over a fellow worker with his truck, but the man hardly has a scratch on him; a truck driver unwittingly dumps a load of earth onto a sleeping Otik, but Otik emerges unscathed. Just as these villagers survive their encounters with cars and trucks—those dreaded modern phenomena—so the village of Koutna and its values ultimately triumph over the big city.

To be sure, *My Sweet Little Village* is rather slight, its denouement is extremely predictable, and its plot is based on a dubious premise (would a director of a major Prague business concern really have to go to such lengths to secure a country house?). But the film is redeemed by its affectionate and funny depiction of village life, and by the very fine performances of several of the actors, particularly Hrusinsky, who is strikingly reminiscent of Denholm Elliott.

• • •

Like *My Sweet Little Village*, Woody Allen's *Radio Days* is small, sweet, and sentimental—a relatively minor film by a major director, set (in large part) in the lowly precincts of his youth. It is also an *hommage*. Allen, of course, goes in for *hommages* in a big way: *Stardust Memories* was an *hommage* to Fellini, *Interiors* to Bergman, *Love and Death* to the Russian novel, *Broadway Danny Rose* to the New York show-biz world, *Annie Hall* to Diane Keaton, *Manhattan* to Manhattan, *The Purple Rose of Cairo* to the movies. So it should come as no surprise that Allen, who grew up in the



Bruce Bawer, TAS's movie reviewer, spent March in residence at the Djerassi Foundation in Woodside, California. His review of David Herbert Donald's *Look Homeward: A Life of Thomas Wolfe* also appears in this issue.

radio era, should make a nostalgic film called *Radio Days* set in New York in the early 1940s. Though it is more plotless by far, *Radio Days* resembles *Annie Hall* insofar as it is an anthology of episodes, loosely tied to a theme, which Allen (who serves here as narrator, but never appears on camera) encourages us to view as autobiographical. He expects us to think of the eleven-year-old redheaded Jewish kid Joe (Seth Green) as young Allen Stewart Konigsberg, to regard the kid's Rockaway Beach family as his own (though he grew up, as the whole world knows, in Brooklyn), and to believe that at least some of the things that happen to them—the less outrageous, more sentimentally depicted things—really happened.

For the movie is sentimental, and unabashedly so. In *Annie Hall* Allen portrayed his hero's folks as uncouth, ignorant, and argumentative; in *Stardust Memories* his protagonist's sister remembers their parents as "always fighting, always screaming at each other." In *Radio Days* there is some fighting and screaming, but the picture of childhood is mostly rosy. Take Joe's first visit to Radio City Music Hall. It's a shamelessly romantic sequence; while Frank Sinatra sings "If You Are But a Dream," the camera—equipped with a wide-angle lens and shooting up at everything from a small boy's height—moves slowly through the majestic lobby, up the grand staircase, and into the dark auditorium, where, on the huge screen, James Stewart is kissing Katharine Hepburn in *The Philadelphia Story*. (Was it then that Allen first decided he wanted to be rich and date shiksas?) The sequence has nothing to do with radio, but it captures the child's sense of wonder very touchingly, and one does not doubt for a moment that it is based upon a real childhood memory of Allen's.

The sequence brings to mind other romantic epiphanies in Allen movies: the Central Park carriage ride with Mariel Hemingway in *Manhattan*; the moment in *Stardust Memories* when Allen's character (in a point-of-view shot) looks up on a Sunday morning in his apartment to see Charlotte Rampling smiling up at him from her newspaper; the hour of happiness at a Marx Brothers movie in *Hannah and Her Sisters*. To Allen, life is mostly meaningless and miserable, but it is redeemed, at least to some extent, by occasional blissful moments of this sort, most of them made possible either by romantic relationships or by some form of art or entertainment. (Remember his eccentric list of things, near the end of *Manhattan*, that make life worthwhile: Louis Armstrong's recording of "Potato Head Blues," Flaubert's *A Sentimental Education*, the Marx Brothers, "Tracy's smile.") His pre-

Annie Hall movies were designed to provide such moments of joy; *Annie Hall* and its successors, on the contrary, have been intended largely as meditations upon the evanescence and transcendence of these moments.

About half of *Radio Days* consists of unconnected episodes—mostly radio-related—in the life of Joe's Rockaway Beach family. In one sequence, for instance, Joe—whose idol is a radio-serial hero called the Masked Avenger—purchases a Masked Avenger ring with the money he has helped collect for the establishment of a state in Palestine; when the rabbi angrily upbraids him for this, the radio-obsessed boy replies, "You speak the truth, my faithful Indian companion." In other sequences, Orson Welles's *War of the Worlds* broadcast scares the hell out of a boyfriend of Joe's aunt (Dianne Wiest), and a love song played over the radio causes another boyfriend of hers (Robert Joy) to break down in tears and confess that his previous beloved was a man. The other half of *Radio Days* consists of briefly glimpsed episodes in the lives of radio personalities whom one member or another of Joe's family particularly admires. The most prominent of these in the film is Sally White (Mia Farrow), a dumb Brooklyn blonde with a squeaky voice who—thanks to the help of a mobster (Danny Aiello) who at first intends to rub her out—becomes a celebrated gossip reporter. There are also Roger and Irene, a pair of high-toned first-nighters who chat wittily about their glamorous life every morning on "Breakfast with Roger and Irene"; though they give an impression of marital bliss, they are both manically unfaithful to each other (forming a nice contrast, by the way, with the surface discontent and deep affection and loyalty of Joe's parents).

But even Roger and Irene are human; indeed, the surprise about *Radio Days* is how nice almost everybody is—even that mobster, even the crooks who break into a Rockaway Beach house (and win its owners hundreds of dollars' worth of appliances when a radio quizmaster telephones during their burglary). But then, to Allen, radio itself is nice—a force for niceness. Significantly, the last line of *Radio Days* is "Beware evildoers, wherever you are," spoken by the Masked Avenger (Wallace Shawn) just before he descends from the roof over the ballroom where he and several other radio personalities are celebrating New Year's Day, 1944. Earlier in the film, when we get our first glimpse of the Masked Avenger—short and bald and nerdy, not at all the super-hero type that his young fans imagine him

to be—we laugh; but by the final scene we don't find him ridiculous at all. He has come to symbolize radio itself, which (regarded in retrospect from the Age of Television) seems small and harmless, and which is truly a "masked avenger" because its faceless entertainers and announcers wreak vengeance upon the evils of everyday life—its banality, its disappointments, its alienation (just as the movies did for Mia Farrow in *The Purple Rose of Cairo*). Radio not only entertains Joe's family, but also—when it brings them war news, for example, or up-to-the-minute reports on the fate of a little Pennsylvania girl who fell into a well—binds them together with the rest of the country. (In a derivative, most un-Allen-like sequence, the film cuts from Joe's family huddled around the radio, to other families, bar patrons, and soda shoppe customers who are huddled around other radios and listening to the same reports.) The film's cozy, friendly feel is enhanced by the

presence in the cast of several familiar faces from the Allen repertory company—some of them, to be sure, seen very fleetingly. Aside from Farrow, Shawn, Wiest, and Aiello, there are Jeff Daniels (reprising his Biff Baxter role from *Purple Rose*), Diane Keaton (who, in the role of a radio chanteuse, serves up "You'd Be So Nice to Come Home To"), and Tony Roberts (as a radio quiz-show host).

Critics have carped that the two halves of *Radio Days* don't fit together. While it's true that there is no dramatic connection between them—and, for that matter, precious little dramatic connection within them—this isn't as significant a weakness as one might expect. For *Radio Days* is not a story but a rambling personal essay; the anecdotes of which it consists are designed not to advance a plot but to communicate what the word *radio* means to Woody Allen. For the most part, they do so with considerable charm and wit. □

In Defence of Freedom

Margaret Thatcher

This collection of Thatcher's speeches—the first to appear in book form—contains major statements of the beliefs and convictions that have inspired her policies of the past seven years.

150 pages (14 photographs)

Cloth \$14.95

Imperialism and the Anti-Imperialist Mind

Lewis S. Feuer

"A courageous defense of the role of imperialism as an agent of civilizational expansion. . . . Professor Feuer supports his argument with a wealth of detailed and varied erudition."

—National Review

250 pages

Cloth \$22.95

Disciples of Destruction

The Religious Origins of War and Terrorism

Charles W. Sutherland

A sweeping discussion of Western civilization's inclination to war, focusing on religion as its primary instrument.

350 pages

Cloth \$22.95

In Defence of Freedom Imperialism Disciples of Destruction

Add \$2.00 postage and handling for first book, 75 cents for each additional book. (NYS residents add applicable sales tax.)

My check/M.O. for _____ is enclosed.

Or charge (check one): VISA MasterCard

Account # _____

Exp. Date _____

Name _____

Address _____

City/State _____

Zip _____

PROMETHEUS BOOKS

700 E. Amherst St., Buffalo, N.Y. 14215

Call Toll Free: 800-421-0351. In NYS: 716-837-2475.

AS

THE GREAT AMERICAN SALOON SERIES



BOBBY SHORT'S CAFÉ CARLYLE

by Richard Brookhiser

Though I have lived in New York for going on ten years, I never arrived until a colleague whose tastes in nights out I had formerly associated with Springsteen concerts suggested that we and our women go to a saloon he knew. In previous pieces for this series, I have pushed that word pretty hard, writing about Lüchow's (RIP), a restaurant, or Fazil's International, a nightclub. But in this case, I use the term on the authority of no less than the establishment's pianist, who the night we went to the Café Carlyle announced, "We're a saloon. We sell hooch, principally." We took a lot of cash with us, and if you plan to visit this saloon, you would be well advised to do the same: one fifty dollar bill per person will do it, provided you don't eat, and you stick to a drink apiece. Of course, the Café Carlyle doesn't charge those prices for the hooch, but for its pianist, Bobby Short.

The Carlyle Hotel's main entrance is on 76th Street, but the Café is around the corner on Madison Avenue. The prestige seats are supposed to be the banquettes along the far wall; the no-prestige seats are, without question, behind the pillar; we sat in the curve of the grand piano, and liked it just fine. The wall paintings look to be about the same vintage as the decor of The Four Seasons—Popular Modernism, which long since stopped looking modern, and in about ten years should give the same nostalgic kick as the Chrysler Building gives now.

Short spends most of the year touring the hinterlands, but this is his home base. He is supported by musicians on drums and bass (the fiddle, he calls it). Shows are at ten and midnight and, as he told an interviewer recently, he plans them differently: By the last show, the customers know whether they are going home with their dates, or alone, and so he programs more introspection for the wee hours. Since I'm married

Richard Brookhiser, managing editor of National Review, is author of The Outside Story (Doubleday).

and my colleague is engaged, we went to the ten o'clock.

He looks like a Victorian Christmas tree cherub—old ivory with a patina. His first gig, as a child performer, was in 1936. For vocal warmth, listen to Sinatra albums; Short's voice, instead of filling his head, and the space above and in front of it, seems to come entirely from the top of his throat—sometimes, by the sound of it, a sore throat. But as you listen, you become aware that, after half a century, this voice, whatever its natural luster, does absolutely anything its owner wants. And what he wants most of all is to carry the words—carry them so that his listeners comprehend, as well as hear.

Not that being heard is a trivial feat. In my short and decidedly amateur career as a singer, I have competed with college mixers, firetrucks, madmen, ghetto blasters, and roaring drunks, in conditions when merely to break through the surf of background noise was an achievement. Even with the benefit of a sound system, or an attentive hall, how many singers have you heard mash their words into nonsense, so that the national anthem refers to "the dawn surly light," or the Hallelu-

jah Chorus to "the Lord Gottem nipotent"? Short makes sure you catch every syllable of his songs; and with the help of his sidemen and his own piano playing, you catch their meaning and mood as well.

Is it necessary to say that the songs he sings are not rock and roll? This is not to criticize rock and roll; anybody who still doubts how necessary rock was only has to listen to the airless and enervated fifties jazz in the movie *Round Midnight* (better yet, go to the first fifteen minutes of the movie, walk out, and demand your money back). But isn't it time we who grew up with rock admitted that the words were always the least part of it—at their frequent worst, imbecile; at their rare best, severely limited. How happy I am, how sad I am, how bad I am, how horny I am—that about covers it. Great tunes can be written for such a limited repertoire of sentiments; the Elizabethan madrigalists actually made do with fewer. But there are times when you want more.

The more Short gives you is, with an occasional excursion into the blues, the

golden age of the American popular song—Porter, Gershwin, Rodgers and Hart. They represent a rare combination: music of a high order (several of these tunesmiths studied with Nadia Boulanger), as well as lyrics that are equally high. But what do these songs have to do with New York?

If they were showtunes, of course, they opened in New York, after suitable dry-runs in New Haven or someplace. But they also express a facet of New York, what F. Scott Fitzgerald called "metropolitan urbanity." Better say, a former facet, for this particular New York is virtually dead (Short is a kind of curator).

It appeared, Fitzgerald thought, after World War I: "... the blending of the bright, gay, vigorous elements began then. . . . If this society produced the cocktail party, it also evolved the Park Avenue wit, and for the first time an educated European could envisage a trip to New York as something more amusing than a gold-trek into a formalized Australian bush." What killed it? Hard to say, but I nominate Holden Caulfield. "In case you don't live in New York, the Wicker Bar is in this sort of swanky hotel, the Seton Hotel. It's one of those places that are supposed to be very sophisticated and all, and the phonies are coming in the window. . . . Most of the songs were either pretty dirty or in French. If you sat around there long enough and heard all the phonies applauding and all, you got to hate everybody in the world, I swear you did." *Phonies*—potent word. The chain reactions it helped set off, which are not done yet, may reasonably be said to include the fall of Saigon. But as far as New York was concerned, the disposition to treat the thoughts of a teenage kid on the brink of a nervous breakdown as profound meant the end of "metropolitan urbanity" as a cultural ideal.

It was an ideal that excluded a lot: for instance, America, the rest of the world, and most of New York City itself. John Gotti and Bernhard Goetz; Donald Manes and John Zaccaro; did Cardinal O'Connor snub Shimon

