

THE TALKIES



SUMMER FARE

by Bruce Bawer

The best one can hope for from most summer films is not that they will challenge one's intelligence, but that at any rate they will not insult it too brutally. Be warned that one of the more brutally insulting movies of this or any summer is *The Squeeze*. This tiresome comedy stars Michael Keaton as Harry Berg, a hapless schmo who lives on an abandoned Manhattan pier and spends his time (a) building giant sculptures out of working TV sets and (b) running away from people whom he's tried unsuccessfully to cheat at poker. Harry's a completely unbelievable, uninteresting character, but the hack writer (Daniel Taplitz) and director (Roger Young) who are responsible for this inert, murky mess doubtless think that he is kooky and lovable.

The film's witless excuse for a plot is as follows: Harry unwittingly stumbles upon a conspiracy to rig a \$56 million "Lotto" drawing, gets chased by thugs through various discotheques and seedy motels, and along the way becomes romantically involved with a process server played by Rae Dawn Chong (have two less charismatic personalities ever shared a movie screen?). Yawn. It's one of those pictures in which the hero and heroine hate each other most of the way through—a sentiment which, in this case, is shared by the audience—and toss lines like "Oh, yeah?" and "That's what you think" at each other in a tone that suggests these quips are brilliantly witty. The few truly funny lines in the picture, oddly enough, were plainly dubbed in after principal production was completed; apparently somebody decided that it might be a good idea to give the audience some clue that this was supposed to be a comedy.

In any event, the film doesn't develop so much as drag, and at the end—when Taplitz and Young, in a fatuously executed attempt to generate some climactic energy and drama, fill the

deck of the aircraft carrier *Intrepid* with hundreds of screaming extras and a painfully unfunny John Davidson as the Lotto drawing's master of ceremonies—it falls completely apart. Nothing in this movie feels real: not the people, not the Lotto drawing (which strikes one as a moron's version of the end of *The Day of the Locust*), not even New York. To be sure, the creators of *The Squeeze* seem to think they've captured the megalopolitan atmosphere to a T (the ad shows a gigantic Keaton being squeezed between the World Trade Center's twin towers), but the fact is that I've never seen a film made in New York that so thoroughly succeeded in *not* capturing the feel of the city. Indeed, I kept forgetting that the film was shot in New York, and kept being surprised by the familiar landmarks that periodically turned up.

Mel Brooks's directorial career divides neatly into two phases. The early Brooks—of *The Producers*, *The Twelve Chairs*, *Blazing Saddles*, and *Young Frankenstein*—fussed over plot, lighting, and cinematography, stayed mostly behind the camera, and at times, for all the crudity of his humor, actually perpetrated sequences that were witty and sophisticated. The later Brooks—of *High Anxiety*, *Silent Movie*, *The History of the World Part One*, and *To Be or Not To Be*—became the star of his own pictures, which, compared to their predecessors, were less interesting visually, sloppier structurally, and even broader and more vulgar in their humor.

Though Brooks's new film, the egregiously titled *Spaceballs*, fits squarely into the later-Brooks mold, in many respects it is an outer-space variation on *Blazing Saddles*. In *Saddles* a passel of villains threatened to destroy the ridiculously idyllic frontier town of Rock Ridge; in the new film the evil planet *Spaceballs* (led by Mel Brooks himself as the sleazy, bumbling President Skroob, a retread of the Governor William J. Lepetomane role he played in *Saddles*) seeks to destroy the

ridiculously idyllic planet *Druidia* (whose king is played by the worst actor in North America, Dick Van Patten). Many of Brooks's films have been parodies of various movie genres, and *Spaceballs* is no exception: the film gags it up at the expense of the *Star Wars* series, and along the way also sends up *Alien*, the *Star Trek* movies, and even *Planet of the Apes*. (How long ago did Brooks, Thomas Meehan, and Ronny Graham write this script, any-

way?) Though many of the parodic references are screamingly funny, too often they seem merely mechanical, as in the Hitchcock take-off, *High Anxiety*, wherein Brooks seemed determined to allude to as many Hitchcock films as possible.

In classic Mel Brooks fashion, the humor in *Spaceballs* consists mostly of sophomoric sexual and scatological jokes and outrageous Borscht-belt puns, often Jewish-related (the spoiled

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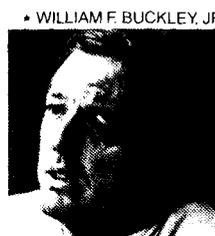
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Bruce Bawer is The American Spectator's movie reviewer and the author of *The Middle Generation* and *The Contemporary Stylist*.

Princess Vespa of Druidia is a "Druish princess"; Brooks, in the role of the Yoda-like ancient sage Yogurt, says to the Luke Skywalker-like hero, played by Bill Pullman, "May the Schwartz be with you"). Corny and lowbrow as it is, however, the movie is Brooks's most enjoyable in a long time. And its cleverest moments, interestingly, occur when the plot drops away and the characters start talking to the audience or discuss the fact that they're in a movie.

In one sequence, for instance, President Skroob and the evil but klutzy Darth Vader-like warrior Dark Helmet (Rick Moranis) fast-forward through a videotape of *Spaceballs* in order to find out where the princess (whom they want to kidnap) has gone. Then there's a funny bit in which Yogurt introduces the complete line of *Spaceballs* merchandise: lunchboxes, T-shirts, mugs, all emblazoned with the movie's title—and for the remainder of the movie, the set decoration includes official *Spaceballs* bedsheets, toilet paper, and

so forth. There are, then, quite a few laughs here—although one does wish that Brooks would someday favor us with another production as brilliant as his classic *The Producers*.

Back in 1966 a director named Richard Fleischer made a movie called *Fantastic Voyage*, in which Raquel Welch and others were reduced to microscopic size and injected into the body of an Iron Curtain scientist for the purpose of removing a blood clot from his brain. In *Innerspace*, director Joe Dante and writers Jeffrey Boam and Chip Proser have taken this "concept" (as such things are called in Lotusland) and explored its comic possibilities. This time, the fantastic voyager is a tough-talking test pilot named Tuck Pendleton (Dennis Quaid), who's in the employ of a Silicon Valley firm seeking to enter the hot new field of miniaturization; he and his inner-space capsule—which

looks rather like a lunar module—are supposed to be injected into the body of a rabbit, but some high-tech thugs from a competing outfit (led by Kevin McCarthy) intervene and he ends up instead in the body of a nervous, hypochondriacal supermarket cashier named Jack Putter (Martin Short). Thanks to some useful devices in the capsule, Tuck is able to see through Jack's eyes, hear through his ears, and speak to him without anyone else hearing his voice. (The parallels to such recent films as *All of Me*, *The Man with Two Brains*, and *Oh Heavenly Dog* cause one to wonder whether the folks in Hollywood are having some sort of crisis of Self and Other.)

The plot is formulaic: in order to save Tuck (who's in danger of running out of air, just like the folks on Druidia), Jack has to swallow his timidity and take on the bad guys, who have stolen a component necessary to Tuck's deminiaturization; in doing this Jack learns to be as tough as Tuck, while Tuck, for his part, learns from Jack how to treat his estranged lady friend (Meg Ryan) with respect and consideration. Formulaic as it is, though, the plot is spun out with a charm and cleverness that at times recall *Tootsie*. And one relatively original touch is that the film takes an irreverent tone toward advanced technology—a refreshing departure at a time when American movies seem more fascinated by computers than by human beings.

Among the cleverest episodes in *Innerspace*, in fact, are those that parody the elaborate sequences, so common in recent films, in which impressive high-tech operations are shown or described in reverent detail; the film deliberately depicts the miniaturization process as just plain silly, the scientists as absurdly solemn and self-important, the purpose of their experiment as ridiculously obscure. (Why do they want to shrink Tuck Pendleton and inject him into a rabbit? Mainly because they *can*.) Finally, the relationship between Tuck and Jack is funny and well developed and (for all its ridiculousness) even touching; both of the lead actors turn in strong performances, and Martin Short in particular does a virtuoso job in one of the more demanding comic roles in recent years.

Another virtuoso comic performance has been turned in this summer by Steve Martin. Martin has not, for the most part, been well served by the movies—or, to name names, by Carl Reiner, who has directed most of his vehicles. Reiner's got the same Borscht-belt sensibility as Mel Brooks, but lacks Brooks's comic genius; his strength lies in the realm of TV skits

and sitcoms, and the bulk of his film work (the closest thing to an exception is *All of Me*) betrays a dismaying lack of visual imagination, as well as a prodigious indifference to such essentials as character, plot, and production values.

Fortunately, Martin's new film, *Roxanne*, has been directed by Fred Schepisi, and as a result it is, of all Martin's films, the least bumpy and murky, and the most pleasant to look at; not only the direction but the editing, cinematography, and production design are all considerably improved. The film's principal characters and plot are no small potatoes either—both having been borrowed, with a few major changes (e.g., a happy ending), from Edmund Rostand's classic play *Cyrano de Bergerac*. Martin himself wrote the surprisingly literate screenplay, which resurrects Cyrano as C. D. Bales, a small-town American fire chief with a nose the size of Wisconsin.

C. D.'s beloved, Roxanne (Daryl Hannah), is an astronomer who's in town for the summer, and Chris (Rick Rossovich), the handsome but none too bright young man whose love letters to Roxanne C. D. agrees to ghost-write (in the original play this character was named Christian), is a young fireman who's also new in town. The film is more often amusing than it is hilarious, but it is consistently good-natured and charming; though Daryl Hannah brings less substance to the title role than one might hope (this is another example of a director trying to make an actress look intelligent by putting glasses on her), Steve Martin is wonderfully impressive in a role that requires him to be at once heroic and pathetic, romantic and ridiculous; he handles intimate dialogue, comic patter, and out-and-out slapstick with equal grace and self-possession. And in many ways his script is as impressive as his acting: it is especially entertaining to watch Martin come up with contemporary American equivalents for some of the situations and conflicts in Rostand's play (e.g., he has created a sequence in a bar in which C. D., like Cyrano before him, improvises twenty jokes about the size of his nose).

But what is most special about *Roxanne* is its respect for intelligence, sensitivity, and articulateness. In an era when American movie comedies tend to present us with heroes who are "common men" with a vengeance (i.e., inarticulate lunkheads) and with villains whose villainy is defined by their erudition and wit, it is very gratifying to see a movie in which the hero wins his beloved's heart because he can express himself intelligently. Perhaps there is hope yet for American film comedy—and (could it be?) even for summer movies. □



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BOOK REVIEWS

It is not easy in America to know what is going on in America. In Western Europe you can read about it in newspapers that have correspondents in Washington and New York, and it is usually the very best journalists who get those jobs. Or you may meet an American official abroad who can tell you what is happening, and again it is generally the ablest functionaries of the U.S. government who are posted to Europe. But come to America, and you find a press and electronic media that is at once opinionated and oddly uninformative, and a throng of mediocrities on the payroll of American government and politics, like extras on a film set, keeping the real actors hidden.

And yet the media in America cannot be accused of flippancy. In Tocqueville's famous account of American democracy, the American mother was seen as the custodian of morals, a pure-minded matriarch who watched over the behavior of the menfolk. Since the American mother has taken to going out to work all day, and adopted the life-style of the menfolk, the censorial matriarchal role has been assumed by the media, for whom the President of the United States is sometimes, and sometimes not, the favorite son. Thus when little Ronnie hit the beastly Qaddafi with a stick, and confessed it at once to Mother, all was promptly forgiven. But when he tried to buy favor from that other old horror, Khomeini, with a cake and kept it a secret from Mother, there was a terrible drama in the kitchen. Hence the so-called Iran-contra scandal, which had the familiar ingredients of a soap opera, made front page news, and was not allowed to die down. The American media have a duty to keep America's leaders on the straight and narrow; admittedly a self-appointed duty of a conscience that may feel guilty about the drivel it makes it its business to provide day in, day out for its long-suffering public.

Of course, the media do not speak with a single voice. Books, for example, are almost invariably hostile to television. This is perhaps to be expected since television has not much room for authors. Radio is different; it needs scripts, and the word is supreme. But the age of radio is over, and television is visual; words are secondary, and if they are required at all, writers are hardly needed to sup-

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AMERICA IN THE LOOKING GLASS: A BRITISH VISITOR'S SUMMER READING

by Maurice Cranston

ply them. So authors of books about TV can be relied on to take a sour look at it, or rather a sour attitude towards it, since it is by no means obvious that they actually look at it.

For example, in one such recent book, *Watching Television*,¹ it is suggested that American TV is dominated by "Reaganism" and a shift of bias to the right. If one watches American TV one finds no evidence of this; indeed the only bias I have been able to perceive on American TV, since arriving this spring to spend three months as a visiting professor in California, is one that leans to the left. The very first program I saw was a feature about the home front of World War II in the U.S.: the focus of attention was on the cruel internment of Japanese Americans on the West Coast and the tormenting of blacks in race riots in Detroit, and the

¹*Watching Television*, edited by Todd Gitlin. Pantheon Books, \$19.95.

stated message of the program was that the liberty America was fighting for was liberty only for some. It is doubtless the mark of a free country that it can criticize itself. But East German TV could hardly have made a more hostile film about that particular subject, and it was not at all what one would think of as "Reaganism."

Another book which provides a disapproving appraisal of U.S. television is *Talking Tombstones*,² by Gary Gumpert, who has the advantage of being something of a humorist as well as a professor of communication arts and sciences in the City University of New York, and who forces his readers to laugh and weep with him at the lamentable state of the media. Part of his indictment is that the technological possibilities of television enable its

²*Talking Tombstones, and Other Tales of the Media Age*, by Gary Gumpert. Oxford University Press, \$17.75.



users to cheat the viewers. "The assumption behind television's editing practice," Professor Gumpert writes, "is that practically all content can be reduced to the essential and can be rearranged for effectiveness. In print, editing is, by definition, always assumed. The presence of the writer and editor is intrinsic to the medium and their thought is part of that which appears in print. In the world of video, effective editing means that the alteration of time and space is hidden, and the result represents the 'fictionalization of the real.' The symbolic nature of the visual image is overlooked, and the human presence behind the photographic icon is disregarded."

The TV watcher, Professor Gumpert protests, cannot tell what is real from what is artificial, and the producers take advantage of that circumstance. This is fair criticism, but it is not especially relevant to American TV, which is different from that of most countries in being remarkably reluctant to make room for the real. The singular achievement of the U.S. television has not been to make fact into fiction, but to have made fiction into fact. The characters who appear in American soap operas have come to assume more complete, rounded, and authentic personalities than the inhabitants of the real world. J. R. Ewing and Bobby are living persons for millions for whom Mrs. Thatcher and François Mitterrand are just faces and names.

What passes for news on the main U.S. channels is almost always U.S. news, and since it is mostly bad news it does not give an exhilarating picture of American life. So far as American politics are concerned, this may not be entirely the fault of the media. Especially since the last congressional elections, the troupe on Capitol Hill has been able to steal the limelight from the star in the White House but not to offer a shining display of democracy at work. To the impartial observer, the pork-barrel politics and the sheer provincialism of so many national legislators are not easily made attractive. The viewer is even denied the pleasure of witnessing a conflict of ideas. One is reminded of jockeying for vested interests among the *politiciens*, as Charles de Gaulle called them so scornfully, in the Fourth Republic of France. De Gaulle, of course, out-manuevered the *politiciens* by appealing directly to the people, and