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# THE TALKIES

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## STREETS OF NEW YORK

by Bruce Bawer

One of the more dire recent developments in American pop culture has been the glorification of the stand-up comedian. Comedy clubs and “Comedy Relief”-type benefits have proliferated; films of comedy routines by Bill Cosby and Eddie Murphy have been released theatrically and reviewed as if they were actual movies; yesterday’s stand-up comics become today’s movie stars. In the eighties, stand-up comics put on airs: the *Playbill* for comedienne Sandra Bernhardt’s recent one-woman show in New York referred to her as a “rock-and-roll performance artist.” Wasn’t it Thucydides who observed that a society enters upon an inexorable process of decline once it begins to take stand-up comedy seriously?

All this is by way of getting around to *Punchline*, which was written and directed by David Seltzer, and which is just as awful as it looks in the ads. Tom Hanks plays Steve Gold, an aspiring stand-up comic who works regularly at an obscure New York club called the Gas Station. Steve is also a med student, but not for long; in the opening sequence, he’s kicked out for failing a junior-high-school-level oral exam in anatomy. But hey, he wasn’t made to be a doctor, like his dad and brother—he was made to be *funny*. Instead of identifying parts of the large intestine, he entertains his examiners with “poop-chute” jokes. Hilarious.

Also appearing regularly at the Gas Station is a New Jersey housewife named Lila Krytsick (Sally Field). Lila’s not as good as Steve—or so, at least, we’re supposed to understand. His comedy, you see, comes from his *guts*: hers comes from a list of gags. Indeed, she gets in hot water with her hubby (John Goodman) by spending the family vacation money on Polish jokes. Hubby doesn’t understand why she’s wasting her evenings at this seedy comedy club for \$15 a night. She tries to explain: “I love being a mom.

I love being a wife. And I love being able to make people laugh.” Her tone is solemn, subdued: Mozart was never this serious about his art.

And seriousness is very much the point here. “Is everything a joke to you?” Steve’s prof demands. Later, Lila asks the same thing. Steve’s reply: “Lady, nothing’s a joke to me. That’s why I do stand-up comedy—and *that’s why you don’t*.” (This is Seltzer’s idea of a profound line; it’s supposed to Make Us Think.) Seared by this insight, Lila begs Steve for pointers; he complies. For he believes she’s naturally funny—and while he’ll lie to a woman about a lot of things, he wouldn’t lie about that sacred subject: “I don’t mess around with *funny*.” All Lila needs, he insists, are “the right gags.” He instructs her to draw upon her own life: “All our lives are funny. We’re God’s animated cartoons.” Apparently, we’re supposed to look upon this as brilliant advice; certainly Lila seems never to have heard it before.

So Lila starts telling jokes about her family and becomes a socko comedienne—easy as that. (Except that she doesn’t *really* tell jokes about her family: the supposedly good and original material she does at the end of the movie is in fact as bad and contrived as the stuff she does at the beginning.) Meanwhile, Steve’s hitting the skids: the same emotional distress that makes him a great stand-up comic threatens to destroy him, *verstehen?* When a TV talent scout expresses interest, Steve says, “If you’re sending someone down you’d better send him fast, because funny Steve is goin’ down.” When a second round of scouts appears, Steve

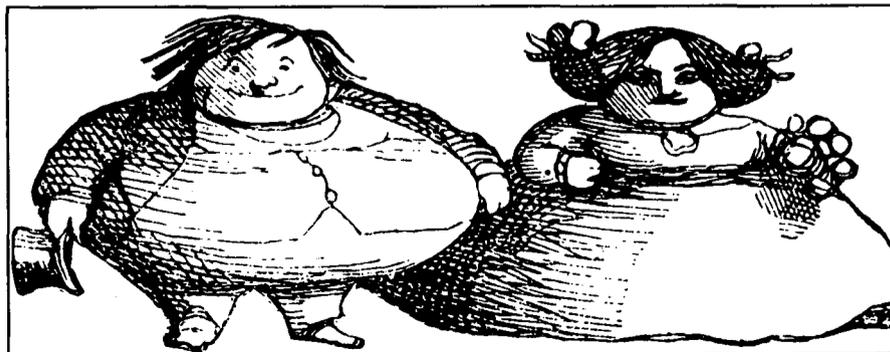
cracks up on stage, collapsing in tears after choking out a gloppy psychiatrist’s-couch monologue about his med-school failure, his macho dad’s love of deer hunting, and his own fear of the sight of blood. It’s a very weird scene, bathetic and overplayed and unconvincingly motivated; instead of feeling sympathy for Steve, we feel embarrassed for the scriptwriter.

Predictably, the film winds up with Lila and Steve facing off in a comedy contest. The audience (at the Gas Station, not in the movie theater) laughs itself crazy; their fellow comics tell Lila and Steve that they’re “brilliant.” We’re plainly supposed to think so, too. But the comedy routines are as lame as the plot. It’s amazing that somebody could make a big-budget film about stand-up comedy and not manage to get any fresh, funny material. Throughout the movie, the jokes are standard eighties stand-up fare: formula gags about genitals and breasts and vibrators, pointless references to baby-boomer pop-culture icons (e.g., “Gilligan’s Island”), faux-confessional stuff about the comic’s sexless marriage or crummy dates or screwy folks. Even Hanks’s best lines, in his climactic routine, sound familiar; and his every gesture and inflection is a stand-up cliché. Like the worst sort of comedian, director Seltzer seems to think that anything will get a laugh if you give it a glib, snappy delivery. Seltzer’s own script and direction, to be sure, are anything but snappy; the film is half an hour longer than it should be, and is full of slack, dramatically unfocused sequences.

What’s most irritating of all about *Punchline*, however, is its governing pretense—or delusion—that the slick recitation of a set of canned jokes constitutes a serious form of self-expression, if not art. We’re supposed to buy the idea that Lila “finds herself” through *schtick*, that Steve is a tormented genius—Nijinsky as stand-up comic. We’re supposed to identify with the feelings of the talent scout when she watches Steve’s act with a reverential awe, as if he’s Joan Sutherland or Caruso. What could be more grotesque? Watching this film, it’s hard to believe that once upon a time Hollywood movies customarily made heroes of people like Zola, Chopin, and Michelangelo; most of the films themselves were far from art, but at least they honored art and recognized it as a moral force, as something in which truth and beauty inhered, as a separate and serious entity. The only thing that a characteristic eighties writer-director like David Seltzer seems to take seriously, by contrast, is showbiz itself.

Back in 1974, the director Joan Micklin Silver gave us a movie called *Hester Street*, in which a young Jewish immigrant woman—played by Carol Kane—made a life for herself on the Lower East Side of early twentieth-century Manhattan. Now Silver has moved ahead a few generations and up a few blocks, has found herself another small, delicately pretty actress with frizzy hair, and has come up with *Crossing Delancey*, an extremely charming contemporary romantic drama starring Amy Irving.

Written by Susan Sandler (who based the script on her play of the same title), the film is about Isabelle Grossman, a single young Jewish woman who lives on the West Side of Manhattan and works in “New York’s last real bookstore,” New Day Books. Isabelle loves her job, loves the readings and book parties and literary soirées that go with it, loves meeting the famous writers who show up in the store from



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time to time. She has a particular fondness for Anton Maes (Jeroen Krabbe), a celebrated Dutch novelist who lives in the neighborhood and whose latest novel she has kept in the window of the bookstore for several weeks. ("What I like most about your writing," she tells the suave, hunky Anton, "is its deceptive accessibility.") She is, in short, the very model of a sophisticated and modern young urbanite, a cosmopolitan girl for whose life-style Helen Gurley Brown herself would be proud to take the credit.

But her old Jewish grandmother—her "Bubby," to use the movie's Yiddishism—isn't having any of it. Bubby (Reizl Bozyk), who lives in a gloomy Lower East Side high-rise, feels that Isabelle's life is empty and meaningless without a husband: "No matter how much money you got, if you're alone, you're sick." Consequently she engages the services of Hannah (wittily played by Sylvia Miles), a loud, vulgar old matchmaker right out of *Fiddler on the Roof*. In Bubby's kitchen, Hannah introduces Isabelle to Sam Posner (Peter Riegert), an unprepossessing young man who lives in the old neighborhood, goes to *shul* every day, and runs a pickle stand on Delancey Street. Isabelle finds the matchmaking process embarrassing and prehistoric,

and finds the pickle merchant himself totally unsuitable. "I live uptown," she tells him patronizingly. "A million miles from here." She's in love with a famous Dutch novelist, for heaven's sake.

But the stolid, no-nonsense pickle man doesn't disappear from her life. He's attracted to her, and she gradually finds herself being attracted to him. It's the oldest story in the world, of course—the young woman coming to recognize the superior worth of the less glamorous but more truly substantial of two men. Audrey Hepburn went the same route in *Sabrina*, Katharine Hepburn in *The Philadelphia Story*, Jean Simmons in *Desiree*, and so forth. With this sort of movie, one invariably has the conclusion figured out pretty early on; the pleasure comes from watching the heroine reverse herself. And in *Crossing Delancey*, I'm happy to say, Isabelle's reversal is managed with remarkable finesse and charm. It is the ultimate measure of the success of this film, in fact, that the match with Sam seems, in the early scenes, like the height of absurdity, and by the end seems wonderfully right. You start out thinking, *God no, they're not going to try to convince us that this vibrant, happy, literate girl should marry this fellow?*—and by the end, to your con-

siderable surprise, you *are* convinced.

There are, as it happens, a lot of wonderfully right things about this movie. To begin with, Amy Irving's performance is luminous and endearing. She captures Isabelle's confusion—her sense of being caught between two worlds—with marvelous naturalness; for all her little lies and self-deceptions, one never feels less than utter sympathy for her. Also notable are the modest but deeply poignant images of the loneliness of a single woman's life in New York: grabbing dinner with girlfriends at a corner hot dog stand, jawing over coffee in a diner, haunting the take-out salad bar at the Korean delicatessen after work. I've complained previously about how few films manage to capture the feel of life in Manhattan; this one does so, with astonishing sensitivity and without making a fuss about it. Likewise, while American films tend to be notoriously bad at capturing the way literary people look and talk and behave, this one does a pretty good job of it.

To be sure, not everything about *Crossing Delancey* is perfect. In seeking to create a decidedly traditional young Jewish man, Sandler has imagined someone who, if his kind ac-

tually existed, would have to be the least successful Jewish guy in New York. (An intelligent, articulate young Jewish CUNY graduate selling pickles out of barrels on Delancey Street? Tell me another.) Peter Riegert's Sam, moreover, is so down-to-earth and secure about his identity that he sometimes comes across as downright smug and self-satisfied. And Sandler gives him at least one line of dialogue—"What's wrong with my world? You think it's so small? You think it defines me?"—that should have gone unspoken; it makes Sam sound less like a Lower East Side pickle merchant than, well, a Dutch novelist.

As for the Dutch novelist, one gets the feeling that Sandler made him Dutch because the Netherlands is right next to Germany and because "Dutch" sounds like "Deutsch" and because when we see Isabelle mooning over this big, strapping fellow we're supposed to feel, deep down: What's this nice Jewish girl doing falling for this *Nazi*? Finally, while the musical score is mostly quite serviceable, there are times when the fast, loud, and aggressively rhythmic numbers supplied by the Roches (a group of girl singers) seem just a bit too distracting. On the whole, however, *Crossing Delancey* is a delightful film—fresh and affecting and lovely. □

## PRESSWATCH



## SCREAMERS

by Michael Ledeen

In early September, we learned from the perestroika news service that Soviet maps have been systematically falsified since the days of the revolution. And while the Soviets made the announcement, it was immediately evident that this had been no secret in the Western world. Everyone in sight had a profound comment to make. The State Department Geographer (a position I hadn't known existed, and one which certainly warrants a profile in one of our leading publications), a previously unknown gentleman named Demko, told us that the Soviet policy was "symptomatic of the paranoia

found throughout the Soviet Union before glasnost." A British professor wittily remarked that "the best street map of Moscow was produced fifteen years ago by the Central Intelligence Agency," and went on to murmur, "Thank God, they have actually come

out and admitted their distortions."

The answer to my question of last month—Why had we not heard about this before?—has now been partially answered by the *New York Times*'s man of the hour, Robert Pear, who interviewed the State Department's Demko

and discovered that we had, in fact, heard about it before, back in 1970 in a magazine called the *Military Engineer*. The article sounds very much like it came from the darkness of spookdom:

The author of the article, who was not identified, said strategically important cities had been shifted in random directions on Soviet maps. In addition, he said, "hundreds of insignificant features, such as remote tribal villages in Siberia, small streams and trails were purposely displaced."

But why, we are entitled to ask again, didn't we, the reading public, hear about this before? After all, travelers to Moscow were certainly aware that the Soviet street maps were wrong, and the hundreds of American journalists in the Soviet Union since the revolution



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