

THE TALKIES



BACK TO THE NEWSROOM

by Bruce Bawer

Our heroine is a cute, perky, sensitive, hard-working, highly principled, sexually square, auburn-haired television news producer. Her boss is a burly, balding, gruff-but-lovable fatherly type; her best buddy in the newsroom is a wisecracking, good-hearted, first-rate newswriter who's had a crush on her for years; her nemesis is a dumb-but-handsome anchorman.

"The Mary Tyler Moore Show"? No. The heroine I refer to is not Mary Richards but Jane Craig (Holly Hunter); the boss, not Lou Grant but Ernie Merriman (Robert Prosky); the buddy, not Murray Slaughter but Aaron Altman (Albert Brooks); and the nemesis—and love interest—not Ted Baxter but Tom Grunick (William Hurt). The movie is *Broadcast News*, which was written, directed, and produced by James L. Brooks, a co-creator and writer of "The Mary Tyler Moore Show."

Brooks struck sitcom gold with that series, and this time out he's very consciously working the same vein. Which, alas, is precisely what's wrong with *Broadcast News*: it falls uncomfortably in the no-man's-land between TV sitcom and movie comedy. What aggravates this problem is that it doesn't want to be just any movie comedy. No, it wants to be a *serious* comedy—a comedy about Human Relationships, a comedy with Something To Say, a comedy that simultaneously makes you think, makes you laugh till your sides split, and makes you feel warm all over. A comedy, that is, with aims much like those of Mr. Brooks's own *Terms of Endearment*.

Now, *Terms of Endearment*—which Brooks adapted very freely from Larry McMurtry's novel—was an odd movie. I didn't believe Shirley MacLaine for a moment as Debra Winger's possessive but emotionally inexpressive mama, but I bought it as a premise for the duration of the movie because so many funny situations were built upon it; nor, though his house was full of pictures

Bruce Bawer is The American Spectator's movie reviewer.

of Saturn rockets and space capsules, did I believe that Jack Nicholson was an ex-astronaut; nor did I believe in Debra Winger's sudden fatal illness. Nicholson might just as believably have been a retired ballplayer, the ex-mayor of Chillicothe, Ohio, or the host of a syndicated teenage dance program; Winger, rather than dying of cancer, might just as convincingly have thrown herself under a train, gone into est, or taken up with a lesbian nun.

As in a sitcom, the dramatic complications and resolutions in *Terms* seemed not to have been coaxed delicately and sensitively out of the inner truth of the characters and the inner logic of the story, but to have been hammered out over bagels and cream cheese by half a dozen comedy writers. To be sure, Brooks pulled the strings well: I laughed my way through *Terms*, and when Winger died, my eyes teared up, but I left the theater thinking "How phony." If that doesn't happen with sitcoms, it's because their creators rarely stray beyond the genre's boundaries, never drag the phoniness out into the glare of sunlight. The lesson of *Terms* was that James L. Brooks doesn't know enough to stay out of the sun.

Broadcast News confirms that lesson. You may recall that *Terms* began with a prefatory childhood scene: MacLaine, the clinging mother, climbs into a crib in which her infant daughter is bawling her lungs out. It's cute, it's funny, it's a guaranteed laugh. It's also nothing more than a cheap visual gag—an unpromising way to begin a movie that wants not only to amuse but to be taken seriously. *Broadcast News* starts off in a similar fashion, with vignettes of the protagonists as children. Jane, age twelve or so, spends all her time writing; when her father calls her "obsessive," she dresses him down, in classic smart-TV-kid manner, for misusing a word whose precise clinical meaning by no means applies to her psychological state. Young Aaron, for his part, is an obnoxious high-school valedictorian who gets

beat up by his classmates at graduation, then taunts them because they'll never make more than nineteen thousand dollars a year. And young Tom is a likable C-student who, as he explains to his dad, gets by on his great looks. (Though the actor who plays young Tom is only average-looking, we're apparently meant to take this self-des-

cription at face value.) At the end of each of these introductory vignettes, Brooks freezes the frame and superimposes a title (as at the close of *Animal House*) indicating how the kid will turn out; for instance, right after Young Tom's dad wonders aloud what the future might hold for a boy who's got nothing going for him but looks, we

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freeze on a close-up of the lad and Brooks superimposes the words "Future Network News Anchorman." That one gets a big laugh—mainly, of course, because of the cartoonish image of news anchormen that Brooks himself proffered on "The Mary Tyler Moore Show."

What's important about these prefatory vignettes is that none of them is dramatically necessary; they're the film's equivalent of the "teaser," that very brief scene which precedes the credits at the beginning of a sitcom, and which exists in TV-land only for practical purposes—namely, to make possible an extra commercial break. Good sitcom writers use the teaser to hook the audience in; Brooks does this at the beginning of *Broadcast News*, and simultaneously establishes that the film will be governed by a sitcom mentality. By the time the opening credits are rolling (as in *Terms*, they follow the teaser), we know that this is a film by a man who thinks of character as something that can be summed up in a single snappy exchange, a sharp one-liner.

From the credits we cut to Jane as a woman of thirty or so (i.e., Mary Richards's age when she got to Minneapolis). A segment producer for the news division of a Washington, D.C., network affiliate, Jane is introduced *in medias res* at a TV news convention, where she's delivering a heartfelt speech about the need for more substantial news programs. The audience finds her argument boring, and when she presents evidence of the superficiality of TV news—in the form of a network news-show videotape of a domino trick—her colleagues miss (or, actually, ignore) her point entirely and break into laughter and applause: they *enjoy* the dominoes. But Jane doesn't get any applause, and when the videotape is over the audience exits with unseemly haste. It's a funny sequence, yet it wants also to be taken seriously as stating a grim truth about the American media. And it simply doesn't do that. It's too glib, too exaggerated; no crowd of TV news people would find Jane's talk so

dull, or those dominoes so fascinating.

But one person in Jane's audience stays to compliment her. Tom, a sometime sports reporter who's just been hired by her station as a newsman, is on his way up fast, but feels bad about it: "I'm no good at what I do," he confesses to Jane, whom he recognizes as having the intelligence, knowledge, and news sense that he lacks. Instead of respecting his honesty, however, Jane explodes in righteous anger: if he's incompetent, she tells him, he doesn't *belong* in this business, and should either educate himself fast or find some other line of work. Though they are drawn to each other, her explosion causes Tom to clear out pronto.

This opening sequence is a tidy job, I suppose: a few lines back and forth, and the film's main conflict is set up. Namely, Tom appeals to Jane but offends her most fervently held principles; as Aaron remarks later (as if we haven't already gotten the point!), "He personifies everything that you've been fighting against." Yet Jane's hostility to Tom doesn't make sense if you give it a moment's thought. The sequence at the news convention presumably means to suggest that TV news people are overwhelmingly amoral and unserious; Tom, who alone appreciates Jane's standards, would seem a relative paragon. Yet while Jane respects everyone else that she works with—is her news team different from all of those represented at the convention?—she has nothing but contempt for Tom. To be sure, over the course of the film she changes her attitude, and toward movie's end is ready to plight her troth; then it happens. Some time after Tom does an interview with a rape victim in which the camera cuts away to show him in tears, Aaron tells Jane that since Tom had only one camera crew, the cutaway must have been filmed afterwards and the tears faked. Horror of horrors! Jane is astonished and scandalized—a reaction which is downright ridiculous, since TV news cutaways are routinely faked. (This viewer, for one, assumed all along that Tom's cutaway was fake, and that it was understood

to be so by all concerned; thus its magnification into the film's climactic issue lacked impact, to say the least.) Jane's forced to decide: love him or leave him?

So much for the plot, which at any rate does not develop so much as bounce from gag to gag; this film abounds with gimmicks that might be acceptable in a sitcom but must be counted here as structural flaws. Brooks drags Tom's father back into the story for no other reason than to set up a gag; Jane's romantic rival, a glamorous reporter named Jennifer Mack (Lois Chiles), is suddenly packed off in mid-movie to a long-term stint in Anchorage and is never heard from again. (Jane, by the way, is responsible for Jennifer's reassignment—an act which seems at least as morally objectionable as Tom's faked tears.) A major turning point comes when Aaron, having been given his big chance to anchor the weekend news, breaks out into a case of flop sweat so bad that within a couple of minutes his face is drenched and his shirt soaked through. It's a hilarious bit, but when it gives rise to a long sequence full of soul-searching and bitter accusation—all of which we are meant to take quite seriously—the picture seems like some bizarre collaboration between Mel Brooks and John Cassavetes. Another of the film's turning points, meanwhile, is overly evocative of the final episode of "The Mary Tyler Moore Show." Finally, several details in the film seem dubious: Would a local Washington reporter be sent to cover serial murders in Alaska? And what purpose does it serve to drag Jane and Aaron to Nicaragua for a brief, tonally incongruous sequence involving a contra-Sandinista battle?

At least Brooks gets good performances out of his stars. Holly Hunter is winning in a very Mary Tyler Mooreish way; Albert Brooks brings to the movie a wonderful zaniness which I'm sure is exactly what his namesake director wanted but which doesn't work at all when the film shifts into serious gear. As for William Hurt, he proves to be so frighteningly believable as a dimwit that one feels as if one should take another, more careful look at his previous work. Yet his is a problematic role. One wonders why Hurt took it on; it's a confusingly written part which requires him to be at once a self-seeking, know-nothing jerk—the embodiment of everything that's wrong with TV news—and a good guy, sweet and modest and well-intentioned. This combination is not easily imagined and, though Hurt does his best, the character never quite comes into focus. This is not the only unaddressed contradiction in his character: Tom's

polished performance as anchor would seem to demonstrate, his (and the film's) claims to the contrary, that he is actually very good at what he does—that he is as skilled a talking head, in other words, as Aaron is a field reporter; but the film never reconciles this fact with its otherwise condescending view of him.

But then, the script of *Broadcast News* is a most rickety contraption indeed, and when in its final pages Jane must decide whether to love Tom or leave him, the whole fragile structure collapses. For neither choice is dramatically workable. If she chooses to go with Tom, she's opting for the predictable romantic-comedy ending, and making it obvious that her declared moral objections to him were just plot gimmickry, and the film's pretensions to seriousness precisely that—pretensions. If, on the other hand, she decides to reject his love because of that faked cutaway, such an inane attempt at a "serious" ending cannot but expose the real shallowness of the material—a shallowness that the audience has allowed itself to ignore most of the way through because the majority of the film's "serious" points have been made by way of rapid-fire jokes and sight gags.

How does the film end? I won't give that away; but I will say that once all this nonsense is supposedly wrapped up, we're given a "tag" (as they call it in sitcomland) in which we meet our three main characters "seven years later." (Since the movie proper appears to be set in the present, it must be assumed that the tag takes us into the mid-1990s.) Brooks patently thinks this denouement is the sort of epic touch that will send his audience out of the theater recognizing that *Broadcast News* is not a typical romantic comedy but a sensitive and respectable film—a *real* story about *real* people with *real* feelings. But its effect is quite the opposite: the sequence is so embarrassingly predictable and contrived, the sentiments so facile and phony, that one staggers out of the theater wondering at the ability of a genuine sitcom talent to make such a mess of things on the big screen. *Terms of Endearment* showed us, and *Broadcast News* reminds us, that James L. Brooks doesn't know the difference between persons and personifications, characters and caricatures, emotion and sentimentality. Nor—for all his carrying on about the topic—does his understanding of the moral dimension of journalism go any deeper than the pep talks on First Amendment rights and such that Lou Grant served up back at WJM. Brooks is a talented man who has stumbled pathetically into the wrong genre; one can only hope he finds his way back home. □



THE GREAT MAHARAJAH SALOON SERIES



THE POLO BAR IN JAIPUR

by Richard Brookhiser

The Polo Bar of the Rambagh Palace, Jaipur, India, isn't as hard to get to as it sounds. You arrive in New Delhi at some ungodly early hour, and ride to your hotel in a boxy Indian taxi, down the wide streets deserted but for barreling trucks and cabbies sleeping on roadside cots. You fly to Jaipur, allowing an hour or two for the airport check-in, which is designed to detect the bombs of Sikhs or whomever (next it will probably be Tamils). Since the Rambagh Palace Hotel is the best in Jaipur, you are probably staying there anyway. You take a huge, vaguely Art Deco room, overlooking maybe the back garden, maybe the front lawn, thick as a golf green and twice as big, with small water channels of white marble and a toad or two. The Polo Bar is just off the verandah. If you get lost in the vast building, staff will direct you.

The palace in the name is not an affectation—the Rambagh was a home (they had a number) of the maharajahs of Jaipur—and to savor the experience fully it helps to know a little about Indian princely life. The recent spate of Raj revivalism isn't much use. Most of it—*The Jewel in the Crown*, *A Passage to India*, *Gandhi*—focuses on the clash of Brits vs. Indian nationalists, taking the side of the nationalists. There is Kipling for the Brits. But the princes stand apart. They were a relic from a period of Indian independence that had passed, and an anomaly, soon abolished, in the independent India that emerged. We enjoy the relics.

There were hundreds of princely states of varying size and clout. By the terms of their accommodation to British hegemony, they surrendered foreign policy to the Viceroy, who also had the power to depose grossly incompetent rulers. Some states were smaller than counties; the grandest, Hyderabad, was larger than France, and its ruler was one of the richest men in the world (in 1939, he picked up the tab for a squad-

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

ron of Hurricanes for the British war effort, besides dispatching the army of Hyderabad). Jaipur was less opulent—slightly less.

In 1976, the widow of the last maharajah of Jaipur wrote a memoir. *A Princess Remembers*, by Gayatri Devi, is available in any big Indian hotel bookstore. What saves you from envy as you read it is the simple enjoyment the author took in her fairy-tale existence. She was the granddaughter of the Gaekwar of Baroda. As a child, her favorite entertainers were the Gaekwar's trained parrots.

They used to ride tiny silver bicycles, drive little silver cars, walk tightropes, and enact a variety of dramatic scenes. I remember one in particular in which a parrot was run over by a car, examined by a parrot doctor, and finally carried off by parrot bearers. The grand climax of their performance was always a salute fired on a tiny silver cannon. It made the most amazing noise for a miniature weapon, and the parrots were the only ones to remain unperturbed.

As a girl, she fell in love with the young ruler of Jaipur. He wooed her in Cannes and London, picking her up at the Dorchester in his Bentley. They were engaged to be married at the beginning of World War II. Her mother, foresightedly, had already bought her trousseau in Europe: "... sheets and towels in Florence and Czechoslovakia, shoes and matching bags at Ferragamo in Florence, nightgowns in mousseline de soie from Paris, and a host of other things. Equally typical of Ma, the trousseau had been left behind and neither she nor anyone else could remember where. Finally, it was located at the Ritz Hotel in Paris . . ."

Gayatri also got a serious, man-to-woman talk from her older brother Bhaiya:

After a long clumsy preamble, he came to the real point of his speech: I should accept the idea that Jai was attractive to women and they to him. . . . "Just because he marries you, you can't expect him to give up all his girls". . . .

"Then why shouldn't I be like that, too?" I asked resentfully, knowing that I was so besotted with Jai that I couldn't possibly think of outside flirtations.

"No, No!" Bhaiya seemed almost shocked. "Girls are different!"

Her new husband was a world-class polo player, hence the name of the bar, and the polo memorabilia which decorate it. When it was a palace, of course, the Rambagh didn't need a bar. If you got thirsty, servants just fetched you something. The small room has been converted with imagination and taste. The ceiling is hung with an off-white

cloth, to suggest a tent. Off-white banquettes line the walls, set with bright blue, red, and yellow pillows; a fountain trickles in the center. On the walls hang polo mallets, trophies, pictures of teams past (the Maharajah is always identified as "H. H. Jaipur"). Since you are traveling in India, you know not to take ice in your drinks; when they tell you it's made from purified water, you still don't take it—it's not purified enough. If you don't mind a



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