

tion that "NATO is dead" ("Men don't give their lives for NATOs or SEATOs or CENTOs or any other Os," he said at Columbia University last year). Soussan sees NATO as a net strategic minus: it obfuscates our sense of national purpose, while on the European side it substitutes gimmickry for serious defense planning. Thus he pre-

sents a drama wherein the U.S. is virtually pushed out, thereby forcing the Europeans to make up their minds.

The debate in Europe will gather momentum as the new American administration defines its attitude toward "burden-sharing" and "decoupling." In West Germany, Gorbachev is the most popular figure on the interna-

tional stage. Although we used to worry about an eventual "Finlandization" of Europe, the biggest problem may appear in the form of German acceptance—whether or not from terrorist pressure, as Soussan suggests—of "Denmarkization," which is a very selective acceptance of the American umbrella: you may promise to protect

us, especially if that keeps the Soviets on their best behavior, but you may not base your evil weapons on our soil. Or, the Germans (like the Spaniards) may soon add: your soldiers. If American policy-makers do not figure out a way to control this issue and turn it to our nation's advantage, it will control them. □

THE TALKIES



THE SCREENPLAY'S THE THING

by Bruce Bawer

Perhaps the most difficult part of reviewing movies for any monthly publication above the level of *Teen Beat* is deciding which ones to write about. What makes this task difficult, however, is not that there are so many movies to choose from, but that there are so few. Omit the foreign releases, and the limited-distribution films that 95 percent of your readers will never get a chance to see anyway, and what remains? In the average month, very little. Among those currently on tap: something called *Mystic Pizza* that proudly advertises itself as "this year's *Dirty Dancing!*"; the latest specimens of post-*E.T.* space garbage, namely *Cocoon: The Return* and *My Stepmother Is an Alien* (these days, the unusual twist would be a stepmother who *isn't* an alien); and an obviously-not-destined-to-be-a-classic one-joke "comedy" in which Danny DeVito and Arnold Schwarzenegger play twins. (Get it? One of them is very short and plump and the other is tall and muscular! This is "high-concept" moviemaking at its lowest.) Leafing through the movie advertisements in your daily newspaper, you feel as if you've seen all these films before, every last one of them—and not months or years ago but the day before yesterday.

To be sure, every year miraculously brings a handful of fine and memorable American movies. But the overwhelming majority of new commercial films are as mindlessly conceived, constructed, and composed as they are competently produced. Indeed, many an intelligent moviegoer in the late eighties may well conclude that movies are technically as impressive as

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ever (and in some ways more impressive), but that the scripts are just plain awful. Well, for what it's worth, I agree, and so does Stanley Kauffmann, the longtime film critic of the *New Republic*. In a recent issue of that journal, Kauffmann unburdened himself of some interesting observations about contemporary American screenwriting. "Screenwriting," he remarked, "lags behind every other aspect of filmmaking. . . . Week after week in this column and in the box on this page [i.e., of "Films Worth Seeing"], I note films in which all the elements except the scripts are commendable." Why is this the case? Largely, he argued, because arty, quirky, personal, and/or message-bearing films like *The Hired Hand*, *Pocket Money*, and *Go Tell the Spartans* (ugh!), which proliferated in the seventies, are no longer being made in great numbers. And why aren't they? Largely, Kauffmann argued further, because filmmaking expenses have gone through the roof and producers, eager to reach the widest possible audience and thereby recoup their investments, have quashed "the spirit of adventure" that flourished in the seventies. "Most American screenwriting," Kauffmann wrote, "now seems a bid at a roulette table, neither slick engineering for a reliable audience [as in the old Hollywood] nor personal conviction [as in the seventies]."

Kauffmann is, of course, absolutely correct about the awfulness of most contemporary screenplays. The average American film script today is more artificial and more cynically contrived than ever, and is aimed at a far more puerile mentality than mainstream Hollywood pictures ever have been. This being the case, however, I don't understand how Kauffmann can sug-

gest that current movies don't represent "slick engineering" geared to a specific audience. On the contrary, American movies—on the whole—are slicker than at any time in history. They're aimed at teens and pre-teens. And what's most woefully missing from them is not the "spirit of adventure" of the seventies but the relative sophistication and dramatic craftsmanship that routinely characterized the better American movies of two or three generations ago.

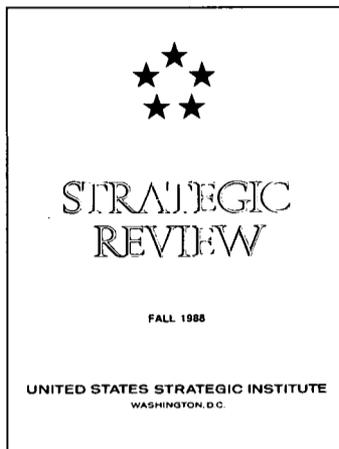
No doubt, one would be hard put to defend most of the products of Hollywood's so-called Golden Era as art. But to watch even some run-of-the-mill Hollywood movies of the thirties and forties is to marvel, time and again, at the intricacy and tautness of their dramatic structure, and at the economy and wit of their characterization. (Relative, that is, to contemporary commercial films.) The most recent innovation of the Ted Turner empire is a network called TNT (for "Turner Network Television"), which devotes most of its airtime to half-century-old B-movies that Turner picked up a while back in a package deal with MGM; the remarkable thing about these films—the majority of which are so obscure (Ina Claire in *Rebound?* Dick Powell in *The Singing Marine?*) that they are new to even the most fanatical of contemporary cineastes—is how watchable they are, how well they hold up. They'll never be mistaken for masterpieces, God knows, but they "work," because they're put together properly; they have focus, shape, conflict, tension.

The principal weakness of today's films, by contrast, is that most of them

are written by people who don't know anything about dramatic structure or character development, who have seen every movie in the last ten years but have never read a word of Aristotle or Aeschylus or, for that matter, Noël Coward. Does this tell us anything profound about the *gestalt* or the *Weltanschauung* or whatever of the contemporary American screenwriter? No, it doesn't (Kauffmann's fancy analysis to that effect notwithstanding). Rather, it reflects an extremely simple—but thoroughly devastating—failing on the part of the producers and studio chiefs who select and approve and initiate projects. For the plain fact is that—as anyone in certain sections of Los Angeles, anyway, is well aware—a considerable proportion of the population of Southern California is writing screenplays nowadays. People who have never read a book are writing them; people who wouldn't write a short story because they can't manufacture a coherent grammatical sentence are writing them. And there would be nothing harmful in this state of affairs—let them scribble away, if it makes them happy!—except that the film business today is largely dominated by people who don't know anything about drama, either, and who have no respect for writing or writers.

Now, the old studio bosses and producers were hardly connoisseurs of art. They didn't read literature, didn't care about books like *The Great Gatsby* or *The Sound and the Fury*. But they knew enough to recognize the importance of good writing to a movie, and when a writer like Fitzgerald or Faulkner made a name for himself as a literary figure, the studio bosses, who had knowledgeable subordinates around to inform them about such occurrences, were

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quick to respond with job offers. Yes, they sometimes treated their contract writers abominably—switched them without explanation from one script to another, had their work rewritten and rewritten again by other contract writers, and suchlike. But their goal was always the same: the best-written script possible. And many of the scripts that became films, under their auspices, were wonderful ones. Can one even imagine a script like *The Women*, for instance—in which Anita Loos and Jane Murfin actually improved on the play by Clare Boothe—being produced nowadays? Or, for that matter, *Mr. Skeffington* or *Ninotchka* or *Pride and Prejudice* or *Spellbound* or *The Story of Louis Pasteur*?

It seems impossible. Not because the scriptwriting talent isn't there, but because the people selecting scripts typically don't know a bad one from a good one. Indeed, many of them don't even think of a film in terms of its script—they think of it as a "project," a "concept." To them, the script is almost a peripheral consideration, a set of pages no more or less important to the production than the daily call sheet. That writing is a special talent, that different people have it in different degrees, that there is such a thing as dramatic structure, that any of this might have more than a casual connection with the ultimate quality of a film: of all this and more the average studio executive of today is astonishingly innocent. To such an individual, what's important is (a) that a film have a hot star in the lead, (b) that it tell a story which can be related in one sentence, and which is similar to the story of at least one recently successful movie, and (c) that it not be above the heads of *anybody*. Not above the heads of the youngest children, or the most brain-dead and rock-obsessed teenagers, or the slowest of the "mentally challenged." In such a marketplace, obviously, the screenwriter with an original idea and a talent for literate dialogue is actually at a disadvantage, and the unlettered amateur with a thoroughly derivative story idea and the mentality, vocabulary, and emotional maturity of a 12-year-old has pretty much everything he needs in order to achieve fame and fortune.

Not that he will necessarily be successful, of course. There are so many bad scripts circulating out there that whether *your* bad script will be optioned and produced is something of a crapshoot. Stanley Kauffmann is right, then, when he suggests that most screenwriting in this country is like "a bid at a roulette table." But the bidding takes place not at the writing stage, as he seems to think, but at the submit-

sion stage. Writing scripts, nowadays, is very much like buying a lottery ticket.

And, Kauffmann to the contrary, these circumstances do not represent a dramatic departure from those under which people like Robert Altman and Peter Fonda operated when they made "personal" and statement-oriented movies like *California Split* and *Easy Rider* two decades or so ago. As a matter of fact, it was precisely such films that helped to give professionalism in scriptwriting a bad name, and to make the idea of "good writing" passé in Lotusland. Certainly the decline of the old Hollywood was in many ways a good thing; there are remarkable pictures of various kinds made in America these days (one thinks of *After Hours*, *The World According to Garp*, and *Blue Velvet*, among others) which would have been unimaginable in the days of Louis B. Mayer and Jack Warner. But it can't be denied that the present pathetic state of the typical American screenplay is very much a consequence of the rise of the Altmans and Fondas. As Kauffmann observes, those filmmakers thought of themselves as speaking to the hip teenagers and twentysomethings of the Vietnam Era, members of what Kauffmann calls "the Film Generation"—a generation identifiable not only by their tendency to make film their art of choice but by their elevation of it above all the other arts (about which they, in many instances, knew little or nothing). It was in an attempt to reach this audience (which was much more comfortable with moving images than with words) that Altman, Fonda, and company effectively brought the level of discourse in mainstream American movies down a notch. The creators of the pre-teen fare that constitutes most of America's movie product in the late eighties have simply followed their lead, lowering the level another notch or two.

Kauffmann speaks admiringly of the "verity" of dialogue in contemporary American film, as compared to the dialogue in Hollywood pictures of two or three generations ago. Yes, the characters in most movies nowadays do talk like real people. Real dumb people. They all, in fact, sound the same. Forget all the special effects; the best way to astonish a middle-American movie audience these days would be to have a character say something witty or clever. If Woody Allen's movies seem brilliant to so many people, in fact, it's mainly because he doesn't conform to the unwritten rules that govern these matters. His characters don't deliver many profound lines; they just talk like educated people, which makes them the rarest of rarities in movieland today. □

BOOK REVIEWS

Even in its bare outlines, the life of A. M. Rosenthal would seem to offer promising material for a biographer. Born in Canada to immigrant Russian Jews, Abe Rosenthal grew up in the Bronx section of New York City. The family was poor. When he was a teenager, his father was seriously injured while working as a house painter; he languished for three years before he died. By the time Abe was eighteen, four of his five older sisters had died as well, one of them in childbirth. He himself had contracted osteomyelitis, an agonizing and crippling infection of the bone marrow. After a series of botched treatments, he borrowed money to travel to the Mayo Clinic, where doctors performed, without payment, an operation that lasted eighteen hours.

Thus saved from becoming a cripple, Abe finished high school and attended the City College of New York. At a friend's suggestion, he tried out for the college newspaper and discovered he had a talent for journalism. Soon he was hustling stories as a campus stringer, first for the *New York Herald Tribune*, then for the *New York Times*. One day he asked the *Times's* city editor what his chances might be of getting a full-time job. It was wartime and the paper was short-handed; he was told to report for work in two weeks. When he showed up, the city editor said he had been rejected by the *Times's* medical department, but he could be hired as a temporary employee, without insurance or benefits. Rosenthal accepted instantly, quitting college to embark on what was to become one of the most successful careers in American journalism.

The story of this career is told by Joseph Goulden in *Fit to Print: A. M. Rosenthal and His Times*. Goulden recounts how, as a young city reporter, Rosenthal got a scoop on Andrei Gromyko that landed him his first big assignment, covering the United Nations; how, as a correspondent in India and Poland in the 1950s, he established a reputation as a gifted writer of feature stories and political analysis; how in the early 1960s he was picked to be metropolitan editor and given the task of revitalizing the *Times's* approach to reporting and writing news; and how, in the 1970s, as managing

Steven C. Munson, who worked for the *New York Times Magazine* from 1980 to 1981, is director of policy at the *Voice of America*. The opinions expressed here are his own.

FIT TO PRINT: A.M. ROSENTHAL AND HIS TIMES

Joseph C. Goulden/Lyle Stuart/\$21.95

Steven C. Munson

editor and executive editor, he carried out a transformation of the entire paper that saved it from financial ruin.

Unfortunately, in telling this story, Goulden shows very little appreciation for his subject. In the prologue he announces that Abe Rosenthal is "not a very likeable human being," and this statement sets the tone for what follows. By book's end, Goulden is describing how he sat in the apartment of Rosenthal's former mistress and helped her plot her revenge. Indeed, Goulden displays a feeling of superiority to Rosenthal throughout, and, apart from a few *pro forma* acknowledgments of his talents as a reporter and editor, writes about him with undisguised contempt.

The ostensible reason for his loathing is the same as that offered by the dozens of *Times* employees, current and former, named and anonymous, who served as Goulden's primary source of information and with whose collective point of view he completely identifies himself. Their complaint, or so they have told Goulden in a seemingly infinite number of ways, is that Abe Rosenthal was mean: mean as a colleague or as a superior or as a

subordinate; mean as an enemy or as a friend; mean drunk or sober; mean justly or unjustly; but, in any case, mean. Now this complaint, to anyone who has ever worked for a large organization in the business of gathering news, will sound both familiar and absurd; familiar because there are so many against whom it has been lodged, and absurd because it is so widely accepted that behaving like an SOB is often, or sometimes, necessary simply to get people to do what they're supposed to do. Being mean distinguishes Abe Rosenthal hardly at all, and therefore cannot be the real cause of the animosity directed against him.

What, then, lies behind it? In part the anti-Rosenthal animus springs from a certain social attitude, best exemplified in Goulden's book by the figure of C. L. Sulzberger. Sulzberger, who for many years was the *Times's* foreign affairs columnist, took an instant dislike to Rosenthal when he was still a young reporter covering the U.N. During a trip to Paris, where Sulzberger was based, Rosenthal made a scene in a hotel over some traveler's checks that

had been stolen from his room. Sulzberger, who was called in to straighten things out, decided that Rosenthal was not the sort who could be permitted to represent the *New York Times* in a foreign capital, and for the next five years he used his power on the paper to prevent Rosenthal from getting an overseas assignment. In later years, writes Goulden, Sulzberger would sigh deeply, saying, "The *New York Times* run by that man?" He would then shake his head slowly and wrinkle his nostrils, as if something unpleasant were around." Goulden also quotes Sulzberger as saying, in regard to a run-in he had with Rosenthal in the 1970s, "Yapping little dogs should be kicked, not heeded."

Sulzberger's disdain was shared by another, to use Goulden's word, "gentleman" of the *New York Times*, James "Scotty" Reston. During his brief tenure as executive editor and Rosenthal's boss, Reston came up with the idea of establishing a special corps of Ivy League-educated correspondents who would be accountable only to him and would operate separately from the *Times* newsroom, which Rosenthal controlled. When Rosenthal heard about the scheme, he confronted Reston and forced him to abandon it. Reston later remarked, in referring to the incident, that Rosenthal "wanted something more than I did, and he got it. That's pretty much the story of Rosenthal's professional life, isn't it?"

To such sentiments Goulden gives his unmistakable assent, adding his own unflattering references to Rosenthal's unkempt appearance, bad manners, and untoward ambitiousness. If some of Rosenthal's critics see in him only the grasping and vulgar Jew of their intolerant imaginations—and such refined and highly assimilated Jews as C. L. Sulzberger are by no means unsympathetic to this attitude—others find him objectionable simply because he feels no need to apologize for his ambition or for doing what was necessary to achieve it. Either way, the hostility of Rosenthal's critics leads them to downplay or obscure the fact that the story of his life—which is the story of a rise from humble origins to a position of power, fame, and wealth—is a typical fulfillment of the American dream.

Ultimately, however, social or personal prejudice goes only so far in explaining the hostility toward Abe Rosenthal. In fact, the main, if unstated, complaint against him is neither

