

THE TALKIES



THE WINTER OF OUR DISCONTENT

by Bruce Bawer

Winter has brought with it a blizzard of widely heralded new films, the most lauded of which is probably *The Accidental Tourist*, directed by Lawrence Kasdan from a script by Kasdan and Frank Galati. Based on a novel by Anne Tyler, this movie—which reunites William Hurt and Kathleen Turner, the stars of *Body Heat*—has been called “perfect,” “a triumph,” and “one of the best movies in many years,” and was cited as Best Picture of the Year by the New York Film Critics’ Circle. The night I went to see it, New York had been hit by a snowstorm and traffic was almost at a standstill; nonetheless, the two large adjoining Upper East Side theaters in which *The Accidental Tourist* was playing had both sold out an hour and a half early, and though it was only nine o’clock I had to buy a ticket for the 11:45 showing. Now, when you get crowds like that on a snowy night in Manhattan for a non-Woody Allen movie, you know you’re in the presence of something special—namely, The Prestige Film of the Year, the latest answer to *Amadeus*, *On Golden Pond*, and *Gandhi*, the movie-to-beat at the Academy Awards.

Of course, Prestige Film doesn’t necessarily mean Bad Film, and there was no reason not to expect that at least some of the critical encomia were justified. Yet *The Accidental Tourist* proved to be a first-rate disappointment—an incredibly lifeless and programmatic concoction, the most solemnly dull award-winner since *Chariots of Fire*. What pretension! Hurt plays a middle-aged Baltimorean named Macon Leary, author of a series of travel guides for on-the-go businessmen who want to visit “the most exotic places in the world without feeling they’d left home.” Want to know which hotel in London has the best plumbing? where to find a Burger King in Paris? Leary’s books have the answers. Always take a book with you on an airplane flight, he advises, so as

to avoid being bothered by your seat-mate. His guidebooks speak to the most banal, unadventurous side of the business traveler, and we are meant to understand this as a metaphor for his approach to life in general. For he moves through life like an accidental tourist, doing his best to avoid contact with other lives, to evade new experiences, to cushion his somber and solitary progress through the world.

In part, this *Lebensart* is a family trait. Macon’s aging, unmarried sister and brothers—who live together in the family manse—are all anal retentives who spend their time alphabetizing groceries and road maps, and who get lost if they wander so much as a block off their usual neighborhood routes. Unlike his siblings, Macon is married, but since the sudden, shocking, recent death of his 12-year-old son, he has reverted to type: his wife, Sarah (Kathleen Turner), has left him, and he’s moved back in with his pathetic, eccentric clan.

In other hands, this material might have been truly affecting. But there isn’t much to get attached to in Hurt’s Macon. He plods across the screen like Frankenstein’s monster, his face pale and eyes dead, and delivers every line in the same robotic monotone. “There’s something so muffled about the way you experience things,” Sarah complains. Alas, in seeking to convey this quality, Hurt has muffled his very expressivity. Watching him, one has increased respect for the late Peter Sellers, who in *Being There* took an equally numb, shambling, and matter-of-fact character and made him truly affecting. Hurt’s Macon, by contrast, is un compelling, a cipher.

And all the people around him—excepting the ever-natural Sarah—are utterly bizarre. The grotesques in Flannery O’Connor and Carson McCullers have nothing on this bunch. Seated in the family parlor, the Learys look as if they’re awaiting an appointment with Diane Arbus. The jobs

here are invariably goofy: Macon’s brother Charles makes bottlecaps for a living. (“It’s not half as exciting as it sounds,” he tells Macon’s publisher.) Weirdest of all is Muriel Pritchett (Geena Davis), a young obedience trainer for dogs, who is inexplicably attracted to Macon. The film’s attitude toward these folks is schizophrenic: it feigns compassion even as it ridicules them, making (for example) a cruel running joke out of the numerous and exotic allergies of Muriel’s small son, Alexander.

It would be an exaggeration to describe this film as having a plot. The development seems random, pointless: first Macon ignores Muriel’s attentions; then she manipulates him into a relationship; then Sarah talks him into a reconciliation. In the end, he picks one woman over the other, because “she’s given me another chance to decide who I am—to step out of the Leary groove and stay out.” Why does Macon suddenly achieve this sense of resolution? No apparent reason. Why does he feel that this woman more than the other would help him to escape his rut? Beats me. “It’s a mistake,” he declares, “to plan everything as if it were a business trip”—and this feeble insight is actually meant to constitute an epiphany, a profound moment of truth. It’s almost embarrassing to sit in the theater and realize that one has been taken on so long a journey for so little. Macon is like nobody one has ever known, and the “lesson” he ultimately learns is one at which the filmmakers have been tiresomely hammering away since the opening frames.

Synthetic as it is, though, this movie looks profound. A composition in brown and gray, it’s lugubriously paced and equipped with a solemn, self-important John Williams score; the actors have the serious air of TV stars doing an Arthur Miller play on PBS. All this may well be more than enough to convince the Academy voters, come spring, that *The Accidental Tourist* is a worthy successor to *Terms of Endearment*.

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Bruce Bawer is The American Spectator’s movie reviewer.

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Speaking of which, they've been comparing Bette Midler's new picture, *Beaches*, to *Terms of Endearment*. Up to a point, it's a valid comparison: like *Terms*, *Beaches* follows a relationship through its ups and downs, from childhood to an early death, and was directed by a man (Garry Marshall, in this case) who is famous for his TV sitcoms. But Midler's movie feels realer, truer than Shirley MacLaine's. And whereas *Terms* gave us a mother and daughter, *Beaches* presents us with two women, C. C. Bloom (Midler) and Hillary Whitney (Barbara Hershey), who meet on the beach in Atlantic City as 11-year-old children and remain best friends for thirty years. They're as different as can be: Hillary, a proper little rich girl from a San Francisco suburb, ends up attending Stanford and becoming a high-profile lawyer;

C. C., a brash kid from the Bronx with dreams of showbiz success, goes on to spend years singing in shabby nightclubs and acting in off-off-Broadway plays before finally becoming a star. But they're united by their fascination with each other: C. C. is awed by Hillary's preppie-ish way of life; Hillary envies C. C. her talent and determination. At various points over the years, the two women room together, fall for the same man, become estranged; both of them lose direction (and husbands), and each helps the other get back on track.

It could be argued that the film (written by Mary Agnes Donoghue) contains too many episodes, and that they are too loosely strung together. But the two women's performances are wonderful, their chemistry is perfect, and the way their lives develop and in-

tersect has a naturalness about it that is very engaging and, in the end, astonishingly tender. Hershey is lovelier and more *simpática* than ever, and Midler is superlative at every turn—funny, touching, and in great voice. Yes, the film has major weaknesses, among them a maddening series of false endings, and a loud, idiotic rock song that almost ruins the film's moving climax. For all this, however, it's extremely gratifying to see a contemporary film that's set over a long period of time, and that regards friendship and its attendant responsibilities with sympathy and respect.

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Like *Beaches*, *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* makes use of an "odd-couple" pairing. But that's where the similarity ends. *Scoundrels* is a farce of prelapsarian wit and elegance. Michael Caine plays an adroit, sophisticated English con man named Laurence Jamieson, who routinely takes wealthy ladies for millions in a Riviera resort town; Steve Martin plays a slovenly American named Freddy Benson, a small-time operator who tries to crowd his turf but who, finding himself outclassed, blackmails Jamieson into teaching him (as Robert Redford does Paul Newman in *The Sting*) how to pull off The Big Con. When school's over, though, Benson refuses to leave town. So they make a wager: whoever can bed the pretty young heiress Janet Colgate (Glenn Headly) can stay; the other must go. You can see the dénouement coming all the way down the Riviera, but the fun is in watching it work itself out. The screenwriters (Dale Launer, Stanley Shapiro, and Paul Henning) keep things moving deftly from reversal to reversal; Caine and Martin never stray from character, and Frank Oz's direction (though it could be tauter) never loses its light, charming touch. It's a top-notch contrivance.

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In *Talk Radio*, Eric Bogosian brings new meaning to the word obnoxious. Bogosian—a New York "performance artist" who, with director Oliver Stone, adapted the film from his off-Broadway play—stars as Barry Champlain, the host of "Night Talk," an infamous radio phone-in show in Dallas, Texas. Champlain is an opinionated loudmouth. "This country," he declaims, "is in deep trouble, people!" And the only hope for a solution would seem to lie in his show. "It's the last neighborhood in town!" he insists. "People just don't talk to each other anymore!" He's at once paranoid, messianic, apocalyptic. "This show is about saying what's got to be said!" he

screams into his mike, and mostly the movie consists of his doing just that: arguing with bigots, talking down would-be suicides, ranting about everything from drugs to the Holocaust.

Bogosian's character has been compared to so-called shock-jock Howard Stern (whose morning radio show is heard in New York, Philadelphia, and Washington), but though Bogosian seems to have copped a few of Stern's trademark gags, there's no real similarity. Stern's a comic who puts down his own program and the pretensions of radio people; Champlain takes himself more seriously than Jerry Falwell. Stern is a pro with a natural-sounding delivery; Champlain (as we learn from a clumsy flashback) is a former suit salesman who got into showbiz because a radio deejay walked into his store one day and said, "You've got quite a voice. You ever do radio?" Quite a voice, indeed! It's one of those slick, phony-from-the-word-go radio voices, and it makes everything Champlain says sound utterly insincere (an effect that would seem to be unintentional, since this is how Bogosian really talks).

Needless to say, the salesman-to-superstar flashback is hard to buy. So is a scene at a basketball game (one of the few episodes set outside the radio studio), where Champlain—supposedly a ratings king—is booed by the entire audience. (What's even more unconvincing is that he seems astonished by the reception: Doesn't he know how the city feels about him?) So is the way the KGAB management treats Champlain—not telling him about a syndication deal, for instance, until three days before it takes effect. (Who's his agent?) So is the fact that practically every other caller is a rabid anti-Semite. And so, finally, is the film's gruesome conclusion—which cynically rips off the sensational demise of real-life Denver deejay Alan Berg, for no better reason than that this feebly plotted, dreadfully stagey talkfest has to wind up *somehow*.

Talk Radio is desperate to make a point. But what is it? Champlain talks endlessly about America—yet his message amounts to little more than a garbled replay of Peter Finch's "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore!" spiel in *Network*. Forget about America, though—Stone and Bogosian don't even have a half-way intelligent take on their central character. "The most important thing," Champlain's ex-wife tells him, "is you've got to start loving yourself!" That's about as deep as this movie goes. Only KGAB's station manager appears to have the picture in focus. "All you are," he tells Champlain, "is a f---g suit salesman with a big mouth." Amen. □

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THE WASHINGTON SPECTATOR



BUSH BASH

by Andrew Ferguson

The *Washington Post* inaugurated George Bush's inaugural week with a suitable gesture: a long piece called "Inaugural Kitsch: Goodbye To All That," by Sidney Blumenthal, the Hildy Johnson who patrols the right-wing beat for the paper. Many conservatives harbor a deep animus toward Blumenthal, and it's true that his work is routinely chock-a-block with factual errors, unfalsifiable assertions, deep-thinking allusions to TV culture, and all the other weapons of the neoliberal arsenal. But a more fruitful approach to Sid's work would be: Leave all that aside, and think of his *politesse*. Think of his decorous refusal to engage the enemy on the battleground of actuality and common experience. Admire his feints against imaginary flanks, and his furious broadsides aimed toward regions where no adversary crouches.

In high dudgeon, for example, he is apt to accuse conservatives of heartlessness, but then gently backs off, refusing to be so cruel as to cite examples. He announces, with deep indignation, that Ronald Reagan promised "to make us feel good," though of course such a promise never passed the President's lips. And as a man of deep aesthetic sensibility, he accuses conservatives of not nurturing artists worthy of the New Deal legacy of such left-wing stalwarts as Ben Shahn and Clifford Odets—an accusation by which any conservative can only be rendered speechless.

His work, in other words, reveals him to be a pacifist in the war of words, straining heroically—at the cost of achieving a reputation as a notable social critic or even as a competent reporter—to avoid hitting a target and causing blood to be spilled. I see him, therefore, as a peaceable man, a man of principle, and to conservatives startled by the smoke and spark of his relentless volley of blanks, my advice is: Be still, and know that he is Sid.

Which is not to say that he isn't a booby. The gravamen of Sid's inauguration article—published by the

Post as a kind of warning to its readers—was that "inaugurations and their accompanying ceremonies are the harbingers of an administration's style," and that the ceremonies accompanying George Bush's inauguration were going to be "derivative of the show that was staged for Ronald Reagan on his own opening night." This, says Sid, should be cause for trepidation among freethinkers, for "the line between fantasy and reality was constantly blurred that night"—blurred so decisively, indeed, that Sid has trouble distinguishing between the two to this day. Wealthy people, Sid notes, attended the event—people in limousines—and so did Frank Sinatra. "Style was substance," he writes, "fashion was power"; to which we can add, borrowing Sid's syllogistic certitude, that substance was fashion, style was power, power was substance, and—most tellingly—style was fashion.

Hefty words! And, compatible with their author's generosity, utterly empty. I attended several of George Bush's inaugural events during those stirring days in late January, and I'm happy to say I saw no reason for trepidation. Not that things were uniformly rosy—certainly not uniformly tasteful. In his dud salvo Sid was referring, in particular, to the Inaugural Gala, which is not to be confused with the Inaugural

Festival, the Inaugural Pageant, the Inaugural Forum, the Inaugural Dinner, or the Inaugural Ball. The Gala, unlike the other events, was televised for the nation to see.

And perhaps that was the first mistake. This 200th inaugural, its promoters constantly claimed, was supposed to be "for all the people," but it's hard to imagine all the people—any of the people, really—having warm and fuzzy feelings about their next President after watching the Gala on the tube. I wasn't able to watch the thing live, but I got hold of a videotape, and when I had some spare time I waded into it as far as I could. There to greet the President-elect was Walter Cronkite, figure of bipartisan rectitude, who recently told another gala—this one sponsored by People for the American Way—that George Bush had run one of the most "sophisticated and cynical campaigns ever." (Maybe his appearance at the Inaugural Gala was the Bush people's way of thanking him for calling them sophisticated.) Then I saw Nell Carter, who danced but shouldn't have, and then a group of precocious pre-teen fiddle players who made you wonder whether child abuse isn't a two-way street. And finally, when the wispy Tommy Tune was joined on stage by Brian Boitano, I feared the whole show might collapse from a shortage of hormones. I fast-forwarded to Cheryl Ladd, but even she couldn't save the evening.

The opening ceremony at the Lincoln Memorial, which I did manage to attend, suffered from some of the same problems. With the SWAT team perched watchfully on the roof of the temple, the master of ceremonies, Willard Scott, first introduced the Gatlin Brothers, who were followed by the Beach Boys, who were followed by that unspeakable collection of teenage hopheads, "Up With People." UWP claims to be "dedicated to peace through understanding among young people of all nations," but the only feelings they inspire in the young people I respect, as they prance and leap

and grin and make mysterious gestures with their flailing arms, is a violent, physical rage, checked only by a debilitating nausea.

These are the acts who show up at Super Bowl half-times, Olympic celebrations, and suchlike extravaganzas, and who event-planners, especially if they're middle-aged Republicans, seem to agree *everyone* enjoys. In fact almost nobody does. This is a colossal misunderstanding, similar to the one that for decades caused people to send fruitcakes to friends and relatives for Christmas, in the erroneous belief that everyone enjoys fruitcake. Fruitcake sales, after years of tireless effort on the part of concerned friends and relatives, are finally declining. That mistake was corrected, and this one can be too.

Now, I'm sure that a social critic of Blumenthalian scope could draw some large (huge) lessons from the banality of the inaugural entertainment—some intricate argument concerning the relationships among illusion and political reality and wealth and class stratification and the technology of mass media, bolstered by allusions to obscure poets of the French Symbolist school, Clement Greenberg, and Ricky Ricardo—and doubtless Sid is pounding out something along those lines even as I write. But I will demur, and point out that the truly worrisome aspect of the celebrations, for this Bush partisan, had nothing to do with entertainment. At the Lincoln Memorial event, to "illustrate the President-elect's 'points of light' concept," most of the crowd were given tiny flashlights, and at the end of Bush's brief remarks, sure enough, they were asked to turn them on. And they did. The instructions stopped there, however, and no one—least of all the Bushes and the Quayles, who stood with all eyes upon them—quite knew what to do with his own personal point of battery-operated light. Some in the crowd waved them lamely, others held them aloft, and some, in embarrassment, turned them off at once and put them back in their pockets.

"A thousand points of light" was a political hack phrase—more poetic and

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