

# THE TALKIES



## TALES FROM THE CITY

by Bruce Bawer

**N***New York Stories* sounded like a good idea. Imagine—a trilogy of short films directed by Martin Scorsese, Francis Coppola, and Woody Allen, set in a city which all three directors have captured memorably on celluloid but which scores of their inferiors have, in recent years, reduced to a collection of visual clichés and caricatures. What a wonderful opportunity, one thought, to rescue this subject matter from the Hollywood hacks and to offer three striking visions of *real* metropolitan life. And what richer trove of material could there be? As they used to say on “Naked City,” there are eight million stories here, and a considerable percentage are downright fascinating.

Why, then, is *New York Stories* so bad? Mainly because its directors have chosen not to look beyond the aforementioned clichés. In “Life Lessons,” Scorsese—whose taut, ironic *After Hours* represented for many of us the last word on SoHo and its art scene—goes over to the enemy, as it were, with a flaccid, flabbergastingly earnest rendering of the ultimate SoHo cliché. Written by the ever-vulgar Richard Price, “Life Lessons” depicts the frantic attempts of Lionel Dobie (Nick Nolte), a successful middle-aged abstract expressionist, to keep his beloved young protégée, Jean Paulette (Rosanna Arquette), from returning to her white-bread family somewhere beyond the Hudson. There’s not a fresh touch in either character: Dobie is your standard possessive, misogynistic, tempestuous, egocentric painter-in-a-movie, and Jean Paulette is a one-dimensional version of, say, Zelda Fitzgerald or *Reds’* Louise Bryant, the jealous, neurotic female appendage who takes her lack of artistic talent out on the gifted man who loves her.

Jean Paulette’s character is completely summed up in such lines as “Just tell me if you think I have any talent or if you think I’m just wasting my time!” And: “Am I good? Will I ever be good?” It’s hard to say which is more

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annoying: Arquette’s endless nagging to this effect (she really doesn’t have anything else to say or do in the film) or Nolte’s interminable slopping of paint onto a wall-sized canvas while his boom-box blares out hyperloud, and *very* abrasive, rock music. It must be said, though, that while Arquette—a whiny, irritating actress of extremely limited range—does absolutely nothing for the picture (no, Rosanna, you never *will* be any good), Nolte at least invests Dobie with a degree of energy, humor, and pathos. As for Scorsese, Congress should pass a law making it a federal crime for him ever again to take a movie camera into a loft.

From Scorsese’s SoHo, we move to Coppola’s Upper East Side—though his segment, “Life Without Zoe,” might just as easily be set in Rome or Paris or Mexico City. It is an indication of his lack of seriousness about this assignment that Mr. C wrote the script with his teenaged daughter Sofia. It’s loosely based on *Eloise* (and loose it most assuredly is), the main difference being that the twelve-ish, poor-little-rich-girl heroine of this piece (Heather McComb) lives not at the Plaza Hotel but at the Sherry-Netherland across the street. The daughter of a famous flautist (Giancarlo Giannini) and a celebrated photographer (Talia Shire), both of whom are usually out of town, Zoe is your typical precocious movie kid, whose daily digestion of *Women’s Wear Daily* and inability to catch the school bus on time (she always ends up taking a cab) we’re supposed to find charming.

Needless to say, we don’t. This segment is worse than Scorsese’s—not only thin but drastically uneven, clumsily told, and overflowing with a thoroughly fake cuteness. It requires a special kind of talent to make a satisfactory movie of this sort—a talent for taking your story and characters seriously while maintaining a light touch. (George Roy Hill, for one, carried it off nicely in *The World of Henry Orient*.) The man who directed *The Godfather*, *The Conversation*, and *Apocalypse Now*, however, has yet to

demonstrate that he knows the meaning of the phrase “light touch”; he plainly looked upon this project not as a challenge to expand his directorial range but as a chance to “have fun,” to be glib and self-indulgent, while varying little from his usual heavy style (and, one might add, allowing cameraman Vittorio Storaro to employ a rich, golden-yellow palette more appropriate to a film version of Puccini). In this age of synthetic New York films, “Life

Without Zoe” is as phony as they come.

After these two strikeouts, Woody Allen’s bunt single looks almost like a home run. “Oedipus Wrecks”—the director’s first comedy in years—is a genuinely funny *jeu d’esprit* about Sheldon Mills (Woody Allen), a partner in a big midtown law firm whose tiny, tirelessly kvetching Jewish mother (Mae Questel) is the bane of his existence. Rather than give away the plot, I’ll simply say that Allen’s is

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the only one of the film's three segments that veers into out-and-out fantasy—and yet, at the same time, it's the only one that's in touch with the rhythms of real New York life, the only one that reflects a sincere affection for the city, the only one whose protagonist we can believe in and sympathize with. To be sure, Allen, like his collaborators, has made use of a New York cliché—in this case, the overly possessive Jewish mamma—but unlike them he recognizes it as a cliché and makes fun of it.

Of Allen's previous films, "Oedipus Wrecks" most resembles *Zelig* and *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy*—though in fact it's tidier, less unbridled than the typical Allen comedy. (Actually, its strongest affinity is with a couple of hilarious post-Kafka short stories which appear in his books *Without Feathers* and *Side Effects*.) Compared with the busy, self-conscious camera movements of the previous segments—Scorsese's nervous and jerky,

Coppola's fluid and operatic—Allen's static camera communicates a satisfying sense of confidence in his story and characters, a heartening reluctance to rely too much on cinematographic athletics to captivate his audience. This is not to suggest that the director of *Annie Hall* and *Hannah and Her Sisters* is in top form here; "Oedipus Wrecks" is minor Allen (though it represents a definite recovery from his recent failures *September* and *Another Woman*). If his segment of *New York Stories* proves anything, indeed, it's that even his less ambitious, more offhand work can be quite entertaining—which is, alas, more than one can say for Scorsese or Coppola.

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*Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, the 1782 novel by the French writer Choderos de Laclos, tells the story of a pair of corrupt sophisticates, the Marquise de Merteuil and the Vicomte

de Valmont, who together engineer the latter's seduction of two beautiful and virtuous young women. When I wrote a couple of years ago (*TAS*, July 1987) about the Broadway production of Christopher Hampton's theatrical adaptation of the novel, I complained about the sitcom-style villainy of the two principals; about the proliferation in their dialogue of mediocre Oscar Wilde-ish epigrams and childish smutty double-entendres; and about the heavy-handed symbolism of the set, which in one way and another sought to remind us that the days of the pre-Revolutionary French society depicted in the play were numbered.

Directed by Stephen Frears from a screenplay by Hampton and entitled *Dangerous Liaisons*, the movie version of Hampton's play represents something of an improvement on these counts. First, the symbol-ridden set is gone, replaced by palatial location settings that are rendered in thoroughly realistic fashion. Second, some of the puerile smut remains, but it is clearer now that its purpose is not to amuse us but to impress upon us the immaturity of the protagonists. Third, most of the epigrams also remain, but while they seemed the very backbone (to be sure, a very flimsy backbone) of the nerve-rackingly talky play, they feel almost peripheral to the action of this magisterially paced movie. Fourth, since most of the roles are here acted in a less stagy and stylized manner than in the play, and since the camera brings us close enough to see the characters thinking and experiencing and expressing emotion, there is less of a sitcomish feel to the proceedings than there was at the Music Box Theater. Indeed, in tone and rhythm and spirit the movie seems much nearer to Choderos de Laclos's stately, probing, and sardonic 200-year-old novel—with its fundamentally serious interest in the nature of love and evil—than to Hampton's own cheap and frivolous play.

But the movie has its own grave problems, one of them being that the two principal actors—Glenn Close and John Malkovich—are among the most decidedly contemporary, and decidedly *American*, in the business. Neither brings us anywhere near the heart of his character's particular darkness. Glenn Close, a wonderful actress, fakes her way through her part creditably enough. But Malkovich is awful: his delivery, his body language, everything down to the way he drops his two front teeth over his lower lip when he closes his mouth, says *Off-Off-Broadway*. His Vicomte simply oozes sleaze. And he's supposed to be able to fool lovely, intelligent, and refined young ladies into thinking he *isn't* sleazy, and, beyond that, able to make them fall madly in

love with him. Patently, the part calls for someone with great surface charm and attractiveness (it's the kind of role George Sanders used to play), but Malkovich is about as far as you can get, in the Screen Actors Guild directory, from charm and attractiveness, surface or otherwise.

How did such an actor end up in such a role? The answer, I suspect, can be given in two words: Stephen Frears. If Malkovich is the last actor you'd cast as Valmont, Frears—whose work is almost relentlessly preoccupied with the new, the Now—would seem to be the last director you'd hire to shoot a movie like this. To be sure, the themes of *Dangerous Liaisons* are not foreign to him: his films *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Prick Up Your Ears* offer compelling treatments of decidedly dangerous liaisons in post-World War II London, and reflect a lively concern with the nature of love and evil, resentment and revenge. But Frears's most recent film, the infelicitously titled *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (in which we got to see a pudgy Shashi Kapoor coupling sweatily with the unfailingly radiant Claire Bloom), underlines the most lamentable aspects of his work: the obsession with sex and sleaze, the injudicious embrace of anarchy, the flippancy. These weaknesses are not entirely absent from *Dangerous Liaisons*. Though the film ultimately affirms the value of love and the destructiveness of vanity, there are times along the way when it appears to celebrate the Marquise's betrayals and the Vicomte's depredations, and to laugh at Christianity, at the ideal of chastity, and (for that matter) at the eighteenth century.

For the most part, however, Frears's film stands head and shoulders above the Broadway production of Hampton's play. At a time when movie dialogue tends to consist largely of grunts and expletives, and music tracks of raucous noise, this film is at least a pleasure to listen to; and Philippe Rousselot's elegant cinematography makes it eminently watchable. Most of the supporting actors, moreover, are far more convincing than the principals. Michelle Pfeiffer and Uma Thurman, in the roles of the victimized Madame de Tourvel and Cécile Volanges, are not only sublimely beautiful but utterly believable as virtuous eighteenth-century noblewomen; Swoosie Kurtz and Mildred Natwick perform admirably as Cécile's harried *mère* and dotty *grandmère*; and Keanu Reeves, who plays a pure-hearted young gentleman in love with Cécile, has just the right awkward grace and air of innocence. While *Dangerous Liaisons* may not quite equal the sum of its best parts, then, there are some very fine parts here indeed. □



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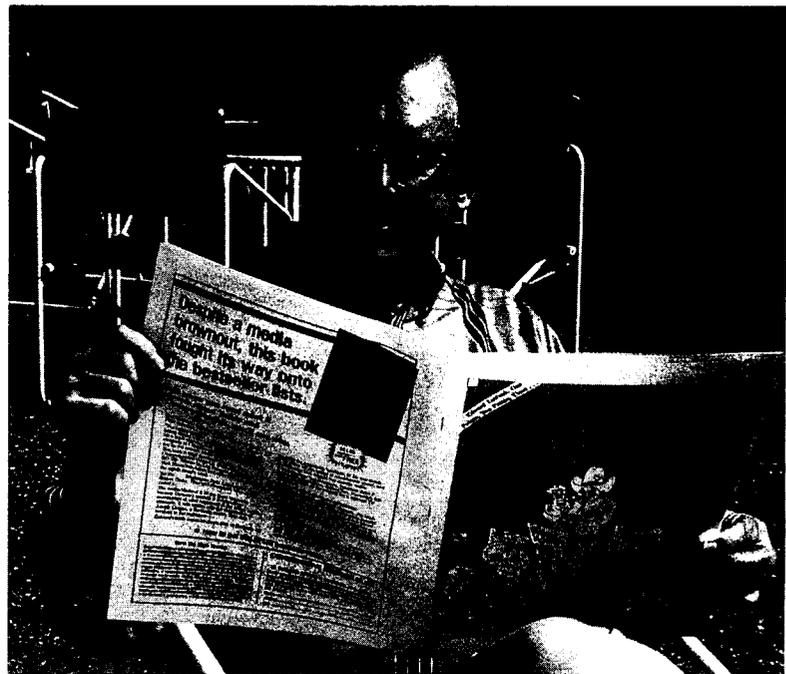
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# BOOK REVIEWS

Nowhere are the paradoxes and mysteries of literary creation more forcefully acted out than in the life and work of Count Lev Tolstoy, in whom an all-comprehending genius was yoked with a boorish dogmatism so fanatical that the author of *Anna Karenina* eventually killed himself off in favor of an author of hectoring tracts denouncing art and espousing vegetarianism. In *Tolstoy*, the prolific English writer A. N. Wilson—a novelist and the author of previous biographies of Milton, Sir Walter Scott, and Hilaire Belloc—proves singularly acute in conveying and addressing these paradoxes, and in delineating with wit and proportion the rise of Mr. Hyde and the eventual fall of Dr. Jekyll in Tolstoy's life.

Born in 1828, three years after the Decembrist uprising in which a cousin of his played a leading part, Tolstoy died in 1910, seven years before the Bolshevik Revolution. His long life was thus bordered by the two pivotal events in modern Russian history; the one abortively seeking to Europeanize, the other enslaving. To the first of these Tolstoy looked back longingly as a lost, noble attempt to absolve Russia of the sin of autocracy; the second he helped make possible with such doctrines as "property is theft" and with his opposition to all those reforms that sought to liberalize the state.

As Wilson makes clear, Tolstoy is unique among Russian writers (or any other kind) in having been born not merely an aristocrat but a scion of an ancient court family whose members were imperial Russia's ministers. Luckily for us, his mother, father, grandmother, and guardian aunt all died by the time Tolstoy was sixteen, stranding him out of court and depriving him of those connections necessary for a career as minister, diplomat, or general. The five Tolstoy orphans, raised in rustic and later provincial isolation, grew up wild, riotous in imagination (they formed as children a secret society called the Ant Brotherhood) and uncouth in manner: Turgenev (who was Tolstoy's sister's lover) later nicknamed the young count "the troglodyte."

The young Tolstoy studied oriental languages at the University of Kazan (later Lenin's alma mater) but dropped out; took up law but quit; lived alone with a maiden aunt on his country estate; gambled away that estate; fornicated prodigiously (a lifelong passion)

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## TOLSTOY

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Fernanda Eberstadt

and caught gonorrhea; joined the army.

What seems like youthful aimlessness—summed up laconically by Wilson in the phrase "tarts, remorse, and reading"—was actually a strenuous and comically self-conscious building of body and character. At the age of eighteen Tolstoy began his million-page career with a diary he started while in the venereal ward at the University of Kazan (an amenity that tells much about student life in nineteenth-century Russia). These early diaries reveal a massive and inexorable determination to master the world and to exert the power of the will over even the most natural or involuntary human functions. Tolstoy's compulsively proliferating lists of regulations contain such subdivisions as "Rules for developing the faculty of drawing conclusions" and "Rules for developing lofty feelings and eliminating base ones," along with resolutions against sleep ("a state in which a man's will

is completely non-existent") and for the learning of law, medicine, natural science, mathematics, music, painting, agriculture, history, and six languages. He learned them all. A sample from this diary of a young madman, under the heading "Rules for Society":

Always try to control a conversation, speak loudly, calmly, and distinctly, try to begin and end a conversation yourself, seek the company of people higher in the world than yourself. . . . At a ball ask the most important ladies to dance. . . . Be as cold as possible and don't betray any impressions. . . . Don't call a person by different names, but always address him in the same manner. Don't tolerate the slightest unpleasantness or sarcasm from anyone without paying it back twofold. . . . Don't be ashamed to tell people who are interrupting you that they are interrupting you. . . .

It is hard, Wilson observes, to imagine that these guidelines "necessarily made him the most charming of companions."

In one telling incident, Turgenev, baited past endurance by the young Tolstoy, begged the count to desist before he choked with frustration. "I have bronchitis," Turgenev pleaded, to which Tolstoy witheringly retorted, "Bronchitis! Bronchitis is a metal!" Wilson is shrewd about this cranky and increasingly tyrannical side of Tolstoy, what he dubs the "bronchitis-is-a-metal" side, a badgering insistence on imposing sometimes nonsensical opinions on others at any cost.

As for the other side of him, a tender curiosity about the world that was his supreme literary blessing, this began to be seen in the stories Tolstoy wrote while in the army. *Sebastopol Sketches* (observations of the Crimean War) and *The Raid* were published in the 1850s to instant acclaim. In them Tolstoy already displays his genius for conveying with golden and uplifting sympathy a cadet at the end of battle chewing bread while weeping for a fallen comrade, the looting of a village, the movement of troops, the singing of grasshoppers, the trivial and delirious succession of thoughts that assail a dying cavalry officer—in short, life in all its joyous, mundane, and contradictory manifestations. Yet joined to the transparent naturalness of observation and sublimely unforced simplicity in these early stories are frequent ascents into stentorian moralizing about human vanity or the injustice of war, whole theories forged to explain, master, and control all that life.

These two impulses, the creative and the moral, strange yet integral parts of Tolstoy's genius, over time were to prove incompatible. In the end, the compulsion to assert that "bronchitis is a metal" would drown out both his desire to understand all "diseases" and his miraculous capacity to penetrate to the very heart of being, to know and to express what it feels like to *be*, as it were, bronchitis. Until that moment, the conflict between the luminously sympathetic maker and the polemicist sounds throughout Tolstoy's fiction like a duet between an angel and a monomaniac.

Throughout the 1850s and '60s Tolstoy published numerous stories of peasant and army life; indulged a brief passion for court society; made—and infuriated—important literary friends like Turgenev, Fet, and Tyutchev; went to England, France, and Belgium where he met Herzen and Proudhon, heard

