

New York Film Festival I

STEPHEN HARVEY

ALTHOUGH THE PREDOMINANT flavor varies from year to year, the ingredients of the annual New York Film Festival ragout have remained basically the same for as long as anyone can remember. You start with a half-dozen or so selections from either or both of those prolific Teutons Fassbinder and Herzog. Then add a sampling from the menopausal French *nouveau cinéma* (usually a Duras dirge or a Rivette reverie, but this year something by Rivette's protégé Edouardo De Gregorio); an obligatory documentary program dedicated to either a) the folksy sagacity of the filmmaker's immigrant grandmother or b) the progressive political fervor of our departed forebears; and one garrulous saga (ideally in literary French, but peasant Italian will do) that clocks in at four hours plus. Also indispensable is an exercise in humanist *cinéma vérité* from some respectably non-OPEC Developing Nation, and a brace of prosy transcriptions from the pages of Great Western Literature, preferably nineteenth century. Plus, of course, the most recent signature piece by some European sacred monster of the sixties, such as Chabrol, Truffaut, or Bertolucci.

Now just because the annual recipe is fairly predictable doesn't mean that each lacks its own pungent satisfactions. Yet it's odd how many of the really memorable recent festival premieres—movies like *The Lacemaker*, *Padre Padrone*, and *Newsfront*—seemed to come out of nowhere, deviating in one significant way or another from the patented formula for the typical festival entry. In

fact, if any rule of thumb applies within the confines of Alice Tully Hall every October, it's that the more widely heralded the newest movie by some acknowledged auteur might be, the greater the likelihood that it will turn out to be a bloated fiasco. (The films of the eternal Luis Buñuel are practically the only exceptions to the rule.)

This year's opening-night film, Bernardo Bertolucci's *Luna*, was an especially painful object lesson in the truth of this axiom. This turgid movie is crammed with contradictory elements (Bertolucci would doubtless call this "dialectic"); rather than enriching the movie's texture, they merely sabotage each other in practically every frame. Like Francis Coppola, Bertolucci fumbles whenever he tries to infuse his sensuous, visceral images with a few distilled notions extracted from the works of some formidable man of letters. In 1900 the inspiration was Gramsci, whose Marxism narrowed Bertolucci's view of the rise of the Italian proletariat to a schematic tug of war between drooling evil and iron-willed virtue. *Luna*, on the other hand, is an undigested mixture of his usual leitmotifs with a heavy dose of Roland Barthes and a dollop of Freud. Ever since *Before the Revolution*, Bertolucci's movies have resonated with his love of *melodramma*, in both its lyric and dramatic forms. However, *Luna* isn't really a melodrama told in film terms at all—it's an essay on the subject of the genre of melodrama, which is something else entirely. Here Bertolucci dissects the elements of that genre the way an amateur grammarian might diagram a sentence: He's so busy analyzing the form that he loses the sense of the text.

Throughout, *Luna* is a dogged compendium of the rules governing this archaic artistic tradition. Characters in melodrama are supposed to be larger-than-life archetypes, so heroine Catherine (Jill Clayburgh) is a transplanted American opera luminary with all the characteristic traits of the species: temperament, self-absorption, and impulsiveness, with gestures to match. Her surrounding cast of comprimarios are likewise creatures of lurid iconography. There's the lesbian confidante (Veronica Lazar) à la *Lulu's* Countess Geschwitz, replete with black cigarette holder and perpetually ironic eyebrows. For a

more contemporary standby, there is Catherine's mercurial adolescent son Joe (Matthew Barry), an open-and-shut case from some social psychology digest: alternately smothered and ignored, enamored of his deeply resented mother and longing inchoately for his absent father. When his quest for love is frustrated Joe makes do with sex and dope instead.

The plots of melodrama are mechanisms replete with unexpected twists of fate; Bertolucci dispatches Catherine's husband (dour Fred Gwynne) via a heart attack just when you and she thought he was about to get their car out of the garage, and during Catherine's subsequent Italian sojourn the director drops increasingly bald hints that her late husband was not Joe's real father after all.

This school of dramaturgy calls for illicit acts and wild surges of emotion—so Joe shoots up with the help of the dismayed Catherine (a fork suffices for the task when his syringes run out), and the two indulge in technically unconsummated incestuous sex, their scenes together careening from bantering affection to ferocious animosity. (Bertolucci would have us believe that these moments of teeter-totter histrionics bare the subconscious of the characters, but since practically every vignette is a carefully constructed journey from joy to *tsuris*, it's hard to be persuaded that what we're seeing is sheer libido.)

LUNA IS THE PRODUCT OF A camp aesthete's sensibility working overtime—Bertolucci has confused the outré trappings of the melodramatic works he loves with the artistic urgency that makes them vital. For great practitioners of the genre from Verdi and O'Neill on stage to Nicholas Ray and Visconti on screen, the structure of melodrama wasn't the *raison d'être* of their work—it was the vessel that contained the turbulent emotions that characterized their vision. Bertolucci reduces it all to an empty ritual of grandiloquence by piling excess on material which, by its very nature, is already stylized to the limit. If one didn't know better, one would assume that the sequences devoted to Catherine onstage were the malicious revenge of an inveterate opera-hater. With its abstractly twinkling celestial backdrop and silent-flicker histrionics, *Luna's Il Trovatore* would make Verdi writhe—it resembles nothing so much as the "terribly modern operetta" Vera Charles adored in the musical version of *Mame*. (The astronomical set is an arcane in-joke, since of

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course heroine Leonora is being pursued by none other than the Count di Luna.)

At the same time, Bertolucci intends *Luna* to tell some down-to-earth contemporary truths too, and the juxtaposition of the trendy topicality of the movie's dialogue, themes, and casting with the souped-up anachronisms of his approach renders the whole opus ludicrous and banal. Bertolucci thinks it's cute when he has young Barry utter things like "I have to take a wicked piss" in his sullen monotone, but what makes it really funny is the unerring tin ear for American idioms of Bertolucci and his script collaborators. More eccentric still was the choice of Clayburgh to impersonate the preoccupied diva thrown unrehearsed into the role of the mystified mother. Few actresses are better than she at playing prosaic but spirited middle-class women, but buried under a red horsehair wig and contorting her mouth while trapped in a fish-eye closeup, she's scarcely credible as a prima donna assoluta; what she brings to mind is Charles Foster Kane's doxy Susan Alexander making a fool of herself in *Salammô*. Under Bertolucci's tutelage, she's likewise out of character when away from the footlights. At home with Joe, she expresses her emotional travail via feeble hyperbole; at the gates of Verdi's villa, she swoons with inspiration in a way that makes her look fatuous and the composer seem like a charlatan guru.

Bertolucci clutters every scene with so many symbols, signposts to cosmic

truths—the skein of yarn in which the infant Joe gets tangled, the blind senility of Catherine's former vocal coach, and of course the all-too-constant moon, apparently standing in for what to Joe is Catherine's maternal eroticism—that they don't play on any literal level. Even Vittorio Storaro's virtuoso camera work—all slaloming tracking shots and portentously angled closeups—is a form of overkill. *Luna* is a genuinely decadent movie—not for its ostensibly shocking sexual content, but because Bertolucci's once breathtaking fusion of feeling-charged content and form has degenerated into mannerism, and he doesn't seem to know the difference.

PASSING FROM THE DELIRIOUS to the prosaic, the festival has showcased two classy literary adaptations, of varying degrees of finesse. Seeing James Ivory's version of Henry James's *The Europeans*, from a script by Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, is like settling back for an at-home sampling of "Masterpiece Theater" on a slightly off night. Actually, with its succession of stage-front twoshots as the actors stand firm to deliver their verbose orations, "Theater in America" is more like it; you'd never know from the movie's style that this was revamped from a work of fiction rather than from a theatrical piece. Determinedly faithful to James's tale of two irresponsible but good-hearted expatriates (Lee Remick and Tim Woodward) who take refuge from

impending penury in the bosom of their stern Puritan relations, *The Europeans* is an adequate illustration of its source text, but hasn't much vitality in its own right. Set in appropriate New England locations of white colonial manses amidst blazing autumn colors, the movie never makes really atmospheric use of this milieu—it's merely a picturesque backdrop for actors taking the requisite Victorian attitudes.

It wouldn't matter quite so much were the performers all up to the Jamesian dialogue, but most of them seem distinctly ill at ease with its elaborately formal syntax. As Gertrude, a repressed sensualist drawn to her male cousin from abroad, Lisa Eichhorn appears as constricted by the convoluted language she's forced to utter as by the whalebone corset underneath that decorous homespun muslin. Inexplicably cast as Gertrude's ascetic swain Mr. Brand, Norman Snow incongruously exudes the carnality one associates with the deep-voiced leading men of daytime TV drama. The reliable Miss Remick capably mimes the determined flirtatiousness that is Eugenia's main offensive weapon, but without the undertone of desperation implying that penniless middle-age awaits, should her matrimonial mission fail; Remick's gorgeously placid eyes register none of this. The recreated world of Ivory's film is pallid, not subtle, stilted where it aims to be genteel.

Wise Blood is a far more resourceful piece of filmmaking, all the more remarkable for the evidence it gives that after four decades as a director, John Huston is as versatile a dramatist and sure-footed a craftsman as he has ever been. Based on one of Flannery O'Connor's sanguinary comedies of myopic, visionary misfits in the Deep South, *Wise Blood* is a movie in which irony and compassion mingle effortlessly. At its skewed center is young army vet Hazel Motes (Brad Dourif), all frazzled impatience and frayed nerves. Hazel journeys to the big city (actually Macon, Georgia, at its January tattiest), where the Bible-thumpers outnumber the winos on the littered streetcorners downtown. The word that is revealed to him goes by the name of the Church Without Christ; his hoped-for congregation would live for the present and rely on their own frail resources to get out of their earthly messes. (Actually, Hazel is just a displaced existentialist and doesn't even know it.) What he wants is converts, but his message lacks the show biz and pie-in-the-sky to attract much of a clientele.

What he gets is an assortment of



eccentrics who seek a more personal rapport with the prophet, but close encounters of the intimate kind just make him nervous. Within days of his arrival from the sticks, Hazel is trailed by the misbegotten likes of a puppyish, lamebrained kid (Daniel Shor) who needs a pal; a beaming, redneck hustler (Ned Beatty) who wants to package Hazel's spiel for maximum financial return; a drawling, middle-aged boardinghouse-keeper (Mary Nell Santacroce) who desires a new husband; and a wanton nymphet named Sabbath Lily Hawks (Amy Wright), who just longs to bed Hazel in the worst way. Although high-strung Hazel was heading for disaster without anyone's help, you know that Sabbath Lily, with her skin and teeth the color of curdled soybean milk, means trouble. Perversely enough, Hazel's final act of gratuitous self-destruction gives him a pathetic touch of the dignity he had wanted all along, but by now no one's left to notice.

Even if Dourif and Wright are a little too adroit, so early in their careers, at embodying twitching looniness, they've never been better used than by Huston, and the rest of the cast is similarly vivid. Huston does full justice to O'Connor's jagged-edged sense of comic squalor. The look of the film, however, is slightly puzzling. Huston employs the same matter-of-fact naturalism with which he treated the self-deluded drifters of his *Fat City*, but Hazel's bizarreness looms too large for the grey landscape of tenements and filling stations he inhabits—the hallucinatory subjectivity Huston once lavished on that other small masterpiece of the Southern Gothic, *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, might have been more apt. Yet while you can question this choice, on its own terms *Wise Blood* could scarcely have been better realized.

IF THE FESTIVAL HAS ONE undeniable purpose, it's to provide a showcase for those worthwhile but somehow esoteric efforts that might not otherwise find their public niche. The clash of cymbals that accompanies a movie like *Luna* lends élan to the rest of the festival, not the other way round, although even a relatively low-key, uncommercial item like *Wise Blood* would surely have surfaced sooner or later. Kenneth Loach's *Black Jack* is an off-beat, picaresque yarn set in the eighteenth century and played by a cast of British unknowns speaking in near-impenetrable Yorkshire dialect; it was a genuinely chancy item, and one of the real delights of the festival thus far.

Loach's two previous major efforts, *Kes* and *Family Life*, attracted only a scant public after their festival premieres; perhaps their respective subjects—the daily minutiae of regional English life, and a psychiatric case history implying that the term insanity is just a code word for medically sanctioned scapegoating—were a bit recondite for most moviegoers, even on the art-house circuit. *Black Jack* seamlessly combines these two refrains from Loach's other movies, and if audiences shun this one as well, they'll be missing one of this year's freshest films.

In *Black Jack*, Loach has concocted a Fielding plot minus the master's lasciviousness. The title character is a mountainous French outlaw of fierce mien, (played by Jean Franval, who has the burly power of a nonsinging Jon Vickers); while he detains a coach on a provincial byway, its prize passenger escapes. She is Belle (Louise Cooper), a pubescent daughter of the rural gentry who after a siege of fever as a child had been deemed insane; she was confined and is now being dispatched to the local asylum. Retrieved by *Black Jack*'s unwilling young accomplice in crime Tolly (Stephen Hirst), Belle is introduced into a rowdy, warmhearted carnival troupe. Thanks to their care and the affection of her youthful swain, Belle blossoms, but there's trouble afoot—some unsavory types lurk about who know a likely scam when they see one; they determine to use their knowledge of Belle's whereabouts to acquire some undeserved lucre. Even the bookish Tolly starts to worry—if insanity is indeed hereditary and incurable, mightn't Belle be better off in that odious Bedlam after all?

A plot so replete with ill-timed coincidences and last-minute rescues might lead one to expect a fast-paced tale of adventure. Yet as always, Loach is really more interested in the workaday details of life, whether in the eighteenth century or today. It's rare to see a film so unintimidated by the prospect of dealing with the trappings of an earlier period—Loach somehow succeeds in infusing his characters with a commonplace ease without ever resorting to anachronism. I don't know whether the performers in this film are professionals, but in any case they're uniformly splendid—they have both the nonchalance of civilians and the sureness of touch of the experienced pro. In its small, unprepossessing way, *Black Jack* accomplishes one of the most treasurable things the movies can do; it gives us a privileged glimpse of an unfamiliar world. □

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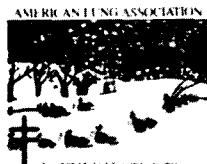
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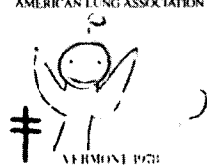
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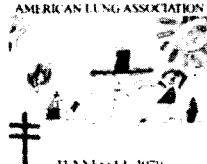
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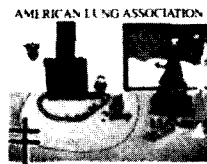
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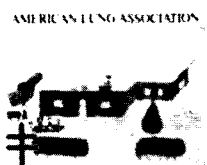
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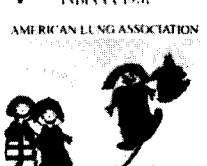
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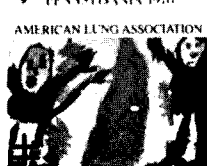
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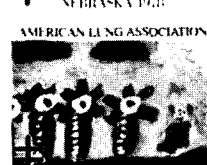
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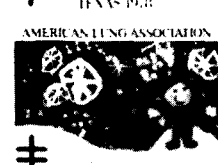
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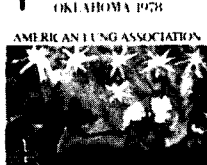
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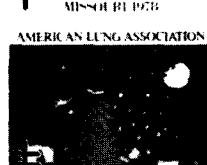
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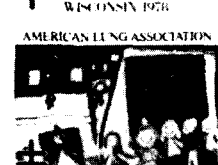
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