

the incurably tubercular and epileptic. Out of this program grew the larger murder project, the killing of the Jews, the Poles, gypsies, Soviet commissars, homosexuals—all assumed to be nonhumans, species of vermin to be exterminated by the use of chemicals designed for the elimination of lice.

What is astonishing—but, perhaps, after all not so astonishing—is that while the fate suffered by most of the above-named groups at the hands of the Nazis is rather well known, what was done to the “men with the pink triangles” has not exactly been shouted from the television screens. Most of the better-known historians of the Third Reich have simply omitted it—names on request. Thus, Sherman’s play can be seen also as a pioneering effort to fill in some of the blanks in twentieth-century history. One may wish that at one point or another he had selected some other dramatic option. But perhaps it is precisely the play’s raw explosiveness that will blast a road through the mountains of ignorance and evasion. *Bent* is, in certain respects, flawed; on the other hand, some of our most celebrated dramatists have been known on occasion to deliver less than perfect artifacts. The Shakespeare of the Nazi persecution of gays has not yet arrived. Maybe he never will. But Martin Sherman may well be its Marlowe. □

F I L M

KRAMER VS. KRAMER, directed by Robert Benton.
CHAPTER TWO, directed by Robert Moore.

Small packages

STEPHEN HARVEY

THE COMING OF THE NEW year inevitably puts film reviewers in a retrospective frame of mind, if only because the year’s end marks the annual reunion of award-bestowing Critics’ Circles in any town large enough to nurture more than two journals of any kind. Besides, at this season all us supposed highbrows start showing our true colors, in private at least, by trying to handicap next spring’s Oscar choices with a zeal that even the average studio flack might find a little vulgar.

In retrospect, this was not a landmark year for epochal personal statements by younger members of our filmmaking elite, Woody Allen excepted; after all the expectations they inspired, the heavy-breathing labors of Bertolucci and Coppola brought forth nothing more than a matched pair of stillborn solecisms, however breathtaking technically, that revealed little beyond the mythomania of their creators. (The ad campaign for *Apocalypse Now*’s subrun claims that more words have been expended in print and aloud over this film than any other in history—which is why my New Year’s wish was that everyone should shut up about it once and for all, myself included.) In fact, most of last year’s really pleasurable and even illuminating movies were made by supposed journeyman directors working within traditional genres and carefully circumscribed ambitions—films like James Bridges’s *The China Syndrome*, Peter Yates’s *Breaking*

STEVEN HARVEY is *INQUIRY*’s film reviewer. He is coordinator of the film study program, Museum of Modern Art, New York City.

Away, and Blake Edwards’s *10*.

The characteristically overabundant year-end releases have held true to the pattern; with all the grandiose disappointments, Robert Benton’s *Kramer vs. Kramer* is 1979’s most ravishing example of intelligent and polished moviemaking on a deliberately small scale. By the usual yardsticks, *Kramer vs. Kramer* is a singularly simple movie, yet deceptively so: Its subject, uncluttered by subplots, is a young father’s effort, after his wife suddenly opts for an unhampered life of her own, to rear his seven-year-old son and subsequently to retain custody of the child.

There are only four principal characters: the three members of this dissolved family unit (played by Dustin Hoffman, Meryl Streep, and Justin Henry) plus a sympathetic neighbor (Jane Alexander), whose allegiance gradually shifts from Ms. to Mr. Kramer, all posed against a background of rather daunting authority figures—employers, lawyers, judges and such. Most of the movie takes place within the white walls of the Kramers’ anonymously middle-class East Side high-rise, in a Central Park playground and in adman Ted Kramer’s place of business, with a climactic excursion to family court. Verbally as well as visually *Kramer vs. Kramer* is remarkably self-contained—the dialogue is terse, colloquial, and unfussy, and there’s not an extraneous line in the movie.

Yet the spareness that permeates Benton’s film is anything but a perverse stylistic tic. He’s found a perfect mating of approach and subject that shows a gratifying faith in the audience’s ability to figure out and respond to the implicit. When first we encounter them, both Kramers are guilty of the cardinal sin of the seventies—self-absorption; Joanna is a pressure-cooker of long deferred ambitions, ready to burst whatever the consequences, and Ted is too engrossed in an urgent business call to notice that his compliant helpmate has thrown in the potholder once and for all. These characters are graduates of the nice-people-don’t-kvetch school of deportment.

Long past the point when it might’ve done some good, trivialities prompt them to blurt out their repressed mutual resentments—as in Joanna’s cry that she “can’t hack it anymore” as the elevator

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door closes on her forever, or Ted's "goddamn her" as he bungles the French toast and scorches his hand on his first morning of full-time parenthood. (They've bent their kid to conform to the same blueprint for emotional containment—junior defies Daddy by spurning his Salisbury steak for a forbidden quart of ice cream, but Billy's shrieks of hatred have more to do with Mommy's departure than with an untouched TV dinner, however unappetizing.) As valiantly as Joanna sets her determined jaw and Ted creases his face with an indomitable grin, cross purposes keep tripping up their lives—she can't shake her mothering instincts, and PTA meetings, birthday parties, and class plays start gumming up his media-hype deadlines.

AS THE SECOND OF THE male equal-time ripostes to Mazursky's *An Unmarried Woman*, *Kramer vs. Kramer* surveys those same sex-role tremors contorting the urban social terrain, but Benton's viewpoint is infinitely more complex. By contrast to say, *Starting Over*, or Mazursky's film (with the sexes reversed), although Ted might have trouble fathoming Joanna's sudden departure, Benton doesn't trivialize her motives, and as they're gradually revealed the audience also comes to comprehend them. Benton exudes compassion for both sides, and one of the most affecting aspects of this movie is the manner in which he fleshes out two characters whose differences can't be reconciled yet who manage to see the emotional logic that guides each of them. *Kramer* is told essentially from the man's point of view (for the middle half of the film Joanna is off in California, *Finding Herself*), and it would have been easy to skew the viewer's sympathy entirely in his favor, particularly considering Ted's selfless refusal to air his grievances against Joanna in front of the child.

The balance is further threatened by the relaxed geniality Hoffman brings to the role. In recent years, Hoffman movies have often resembled pitched showdowns between actor and character, with Hoffman attacking as if the role might subdue him should his energy flag for an instant. His jagged restlessness still surfaces occasionally here, but with a clear purpose—usually when Ted must work at assuming a brave face on things for the sake of his son or his boss, which fails to snow anyone, least of all himself. He also resists the impulse to play it for schlemielish self-pity—it's a

performance so disciplined that, paradoxically, he's rarely seemed so relaxed on screen, and even brief reaction shots of Hoffman merely listening to another character manage to contain volumes of feeling.

At the same time, from the film's very first shot—a lingering close-up of Joanna lovingly murmuring endearments over her sleeping child—*Kramer* is clearly no chauvinist nightmare of self-righteous feminist harpydom. Benton could hardly have done otherwise, once he decided to cast Meryl Streep in the part. She's expert at using the elongated curves of her face to express eager sincerity and reserved self-possession, seemingly at the same instant; her culminating monologue on the witness stand, expressing her dual need to be independent and to nurture her child, emanates the subtle concentration of a performer with a rare instinct for acting for the camera.

The fact that Joanna's presence hovers over the film even during her absence can't be attributed just to Streep's indisputable gifts; Benton scatters unobtrusive visual cues referring to this character throughout the story—the vacant rocking chair next to the child's bed, the cheery greeting cards she sends him, the photograph Ted finds secreted in the boy's chest of drawers. Her return is likewise conveyed via the most economic

means: a long shot of Streep standing at a restaurant window watching the child arrive at school—just a flash, then fade to black. Benton transforms potential bathos into well-earned sentiment by pulling up close when the characters are in control and withdrawing discreetly when their defenses fall—you hear the kid crying in the dark for his mother without being primed by a shot of his tears, and see Ted nestle up to his son without throat-choking lullabies smothering the soundtrack. As one leisurely long-take episode follows another, the emotions *Kramer* generates tend to sneak up on you; this is sophisticated domestic drama of the highest order.

More than passing praise is due the bewildered wistfulness Jane Alexander brings to the role of Hoffman's platonic pal, and to Justin Henry, a spontaneous and appealing child who stops well short of throttling you with darlingness. Also worth noting are the succinct punctuation of Jerry Greenberg's editing, and the infallible Nestor Almendros's unobtrusively elegant camerawork. Yet after two interesting false starts, with *Bad Company* and *The Late Show*, it's the emergence of Benton as a director with a rare balance of craft and feeling that makes *Kramer vs. Kramer* such a nice coda to the past movie year. Since we're apparently living in an era of films dedicat-





ed to warming over traditional attitudes and storytelling conventions that would have been dismissed as indigestible treacle just a few years ago, at least we're fortunate that the Yateses, Edwardses, and Bentons are around to dish them out with so much class and assurance.

ON BROADWAY, NEIL SIMON's confessedly autobiographical play about a recent widower's guilty refusal to accept the prospect of a second chance for marital happiness was greeted by some as evidence of his arrival as a serious playwright. Simon's power and track record assured that the film would preserve his play nearly intact, and on screen, *Chapter Two* only goes to show that sincerity isn't everything. The first half (or Act One), in which mourning novelist James Caan is lured out of his torpor by Hello Girl Marsha Mason, may be tolerably cute, depending on your tolerance for talking-head celluloid theater pieces that masquerade as movies by sending their characters out in the fresh air from time to time. Act Two is tedious going by any definition, since the anguished self-indulgence of Simon's stand-in hero is so protracted that you long to flee and take the ever-forbearing Mason along with you. At one point her Eve Arden-ish crosby (played by Valerie Harper) describes Caan as not so handsome but with an intelligent face, and Caan strives visibly but in vain to convince you that she didn't get her adjectives reversed somehow.

Mason's case is positively Pirandellian: As Simon's second wife she is literally the subject of *Chapter Two*, and her bio reveals a string of distinguished cred-

its in classical roles from her pre-Simon days. Yet although this cheery, tilt-nosed lady comes across as a patently nice person (which is, granted, a prerequisite for the part), she hasn't even got the technique to wring laughs out of Simon's foolproof jaunty quips. As she chats of

her forays to the provinces to play Shaw and Ibsen, and turns down a chance to audition for Joseph Papp (in this movie there are more plugs for the Public Theater than beer ads on a ballgame telecast), you're not sure whether she really is an actress, much less can play one. Neither Caan's movie brother Joseph Bologna nor Harper is much help; director Robert Moore makes sure his cast enunciates Simon's lines nice and loud.

OUT AND AROUND

The Jerk—An aching strenuous attempt by Steve Martin to prove his comedy can stand up to long-form, big screen treatment, which mostly goes to show how silly one-note gooniness can seem when stretched out for ninety minutes. Carl Reiner, who co-wrote and directed *The Jerk*, apparently took much of his inspiration from Harry Langdon-esque silent comedy, and this ham-handed imitation will look pretty lame to anyone familiar with the genuine article. Also, like a lot of recent comedies, it looks as if it had been made in super-8 on a budget of approximately \$7.96. □

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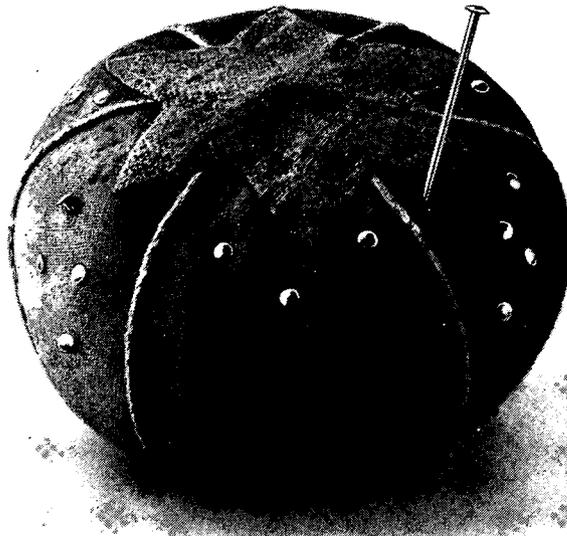
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