

arts & letters

MOVIES

Reviewed by John Hospers

Querelle

Pretentious, ambiguous, and symbol-laden like the rest of his films is Fassbinder's last work, *Querelle*. Filmed in English, dubbed into German, it is now visible on American screens in German with English subtitles.

The story concerns a naval enlistee (Brad Davis of *Midnight Express*) whose secret desire for his brother's love becomes so all-consuming as to exclude emotionally his brother's mistress (Jeanne Moreau), who recognizes at last that she is an outsider to where the real love is. So far, the story is unusual and plausible, but it is overlaid with an affair between Davis and another navy man whom he then reports to the police for a murder in order to "sanctify his crimes." This particular plot twist is hardly believable unless the informant is consumed with guilt and turns the other man in to prove that "he's not one of them," something of which the film fails to convince us. Nor is "redemption through humiliation" a theme likely to titillate American audiences. There is so much in the plot that is never cleared up that its final impact is diffuse and less than satisfying.

The trouble is not so much with Fassbinder as with Jean Genêt, whose work Fassbinder tries to follow too slavishly. Genêt's strange combination of sex, guilt, and masochism is not likely to be shared or even understood by most audiences, and his purple prose uttered by the off-screen narrator does nothing either for the viewer's comprehension or for the cinematic qualities of the film. It would have been preferable if the director had set forth on his own rather than tie his story to a literary piece so full of murky plot twists and far-out motivations that, to audiences accustomed to intelligible characters, the whole thing will reek of deliberate mystery mongering.

Blue Thunder

Blue Thunder is one of the most visually exciting films in years. Most of the shots are of helicopters (presumably taken from other helicopters) flying above Los Angeles by day and by night: some are frightening, others beautiful, all of them

fast-moving and suffused with kinetic energy.

The film also raises certain moral issues, although these are not pursued. The police are there to protect the citizens against criminals. But the futuristic technology exhibited in the film—computer printouts of everyone's history available right there in the helicopter, devices for hearing conversations miles away and for seeing close-up (from a great distance) the perpetration of criminal acts, missiles that spot targets through heat (it is announced at the beginning of the film that all these are already in use in the armed forces)—all this is scary; while it facilitates the instant apprehension of criminals, it can also be used to violate privacy in many ways and even to get rid of those whom the police may consider "undesirable." In the film, the good cop (Roy Scheider) is pitted against the machinations of the bad cop (Malcolm MacDowell) in an attempt to foil a plan to use aggressively the very technology that was supposed to be used defensively. The implicit moral of the tale is: there is no weapon of defense that cannot also be used for aggression.

Exciting as it is, it's really an old-fashioned cops-and-robbers film. From the moment a helicopter with the new equipment is discovered taping the ongoing conspiracy being hatched, we know that it is to be a battle of good against evil. That evil does not win is not the result of any antecedent probability but of the plot gimmickry by which the hero ends up with the best luck and the best equipment.

Parsifal

Five hours is a long time to sit still in one's seat. But five hours is the length of Wagner's final opera, *Parsifal*, and German filmmaker Hans Syberberg's decision to provide an uncut version of the opera, rather than play God with Wagner's score, is wholly admirable. Most opera lovers do not reside in large cities where opera is performed, and even those who do could wait for years without being able to witness a single production of *Parsifal*. Now they can see an excellent performance of it on film, with translations on the screen.

This is much more than a filmed version of an opera: Syberberg uses visual devices that would be virtually impos-

sible on the stage. Some of these—such as the watch tower of a concentration camp and Parsifal viewed against a ridge that is actually Wagner's face in profile—have more to do with Syberberg's personal associations with the opera than with Wagner's work. The viewer will either find these enhancing his experience, enriching the stream of associations, or find them irrelevant intrusions into the story. In any case, it is the music that is supreme.

Many listeners who enjoy Wagner's more-extroverted and melodic operas, such as *Tannhäuser*, *Lohengrin*, and *Meistersinger*, are bored by *Parsifal*. At first hearing, much of it does seem dull or unintelligible, and one waits for the familiar themes heard in selections from the opera, such as the "Prelude" and "Good Friday Spell." But to ignore the rest is, I think, a mistake. In the case of *Parsifal*, the threads of melodic connection do reveal themselves to repeated listenings. It is the most intricately textured of Wagner's works (including his equally long, penultimate opera, *Götterdämmerung*). A single exposure to it does not yield up its treasures, but repeated listening more than justifies the initial effort. Those who come to *Parsifal* for non-musical reasons, such as readers of last year's provocative book *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* and those fascinated by Knights Templar and the history of secret societies, will unfortunately not grasp the intricate *musical* structure on which the aesthetic effect of the opera largely depends.

This is not a film for everyone. Those who are not tuned in to classical music will simply be bored by it. Those who like classical music but have never had an opportunity to hear *full* operas of Wagner may find a single exposure to it insufficient (as explained above). Moreover, the film, by bringing everything close up, does not always improve the operatic experience. The great communion scene of the Knights of the Holy Grail is more awe-inspiring in the opera house than on the screen: it must be seen as it was intended to be seen, as live theater in the hushed silence of a darkened auditorium. The intimacy of close-ups often destroys the magic. Still, there is plenty of magic to go round in this film.

John Hospers is the author of Understanding the Arts. He teaches philosophy at the University of Southern California.

THEATRE

The Liz & Dick Show

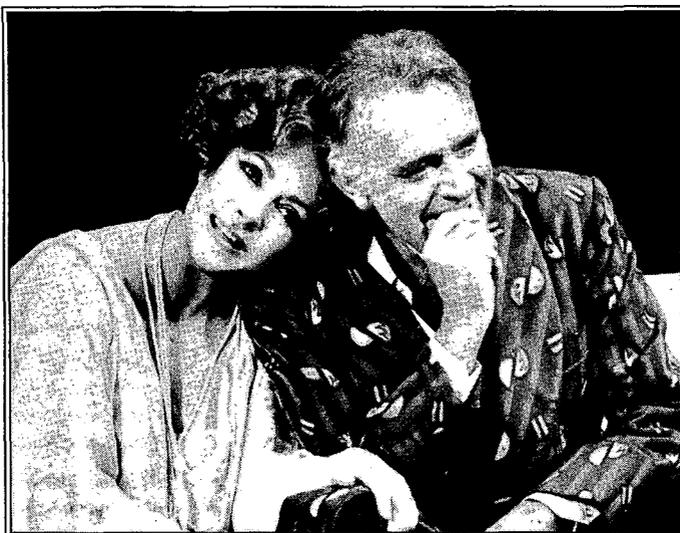
By David Brudnoy

If you would trudge miles through the mud, were you invited to trudge miles through the mud, to ride horses along with Ronald Reagan and Queen Elizabeth (never mind that you don't ride horses very well and the humans can hardly have said anything terribly interesting to each other), then you are among that probably large (I'd wager ninety-nine-plus-something) percent of the theater-going population that might in time trudge through the elements, blizzard or sultry heat-wave or whatever, and pay an inordinate ticket price, in order to see another interesting couple do a not too interesting thing to an interesting experience.

Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, twice married and twice divorced to and from each other, endlessly chronicled for their marriages and their divorces as well as for their acting on-stage and off, have rather awkwardly been squeezed into Noel Coward's frothy bonbon, *Private Lives*. Its opening in Boston was accompanied by klieg lights—*Evita* didn't get klieg lights; hell, in Boston *nobody* gets klieg lights—more Cadillac stretch limousines than usually accompany the highest and mightiest of Boston society, and more than enough advance publicity. From Boston, *Private Lives* journeyed, no doubt in very private airplanes and transport trucks, to New York, there to triumph with the masses irrespective of what impression it makes on the critics—the discerning critics in Boston cordially detested it, while gentler souls amongst our fraternity tried to find something nice to say about the Liz and Dick show. Finally, *Private Lives* will journey to selected outposts of theatrical consciousness, at which time you may, if you must, trudge through whatever obstacles confront you, and see the thing. And good luck to you.

What will you get for your money and your time? One of the most sublimely in-

spired of Mr. Coward's creations, one written expressly for himself and Gertrude Lawrence in 1930. She sent him on his merry way upon the waves on the *Tenyo Maru*, en route to Japan, bidding him construct something for the two of them; and as he lay sleepless in Tokyo, at the Imperial Hotel (where else?), the thing materialized before him and in four days practically wrote itself. So Mr. Coward told us in *Present Indicative*, his 1937 autobiography. Equally a star vehicle for the male and female lead, and costarring Laurence Olivier and Adrienne Allen, *Private Lives* instantly became a smash on both sides of the Atlantic, was thrice revived—first in 1948 with Tallulah Bankhead and



Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton are reunited in a revival of Noel Coward's *PRIVATE LIVES*.

Donald Cook, again in 1969 with Tammy Grimes and Brian Bedford, and now as the Liz and Dick show—and is forever on stage in amateur productions.

The story is simplicity itself, a suitable edifice to have been assembled in a mad dash at the Imperial Hotel in four nights. Amanda and Elyot, once married to each other, are on their honeymoons five years later with new spouses, in adjacent suites at a posh resort hotel on the Riviera, of course unbeknownst to each other. When they meet, each tries to convince the new mates to leave instantly; her new husband and his new wife consider their new spouses mad. This leaves Amanda and Elyot alone on the terrace, where love is rekindled, and they flee to Amanda's flat in Paris. Shortly the rekindled fires become conflagrations, the old habits of bicker and bedlam reassert themselves, and we have a rip-roaring fight climaxing the second act.

In act three, the jilted husband of

Amanda and wife of Elyot, Sybil and Victor, arrive in Paris. A delicious bit of bitchiness masquerading as total decorum enlivens a foursome for breakfast, and the play gaily hops along to its amusing conclusion.

The Liz and Dick show has, as it were, the music but not the tempo. What is meant as froth becomes minestrone as Miss Taylor, ample as her reputation and hideously squeezed into a Theoni V. Aldredge wardrobe that features unbearably low-cut trifles and unbearably elaborate sequined horrors, and Mr. Burton, who is meant to bear swords and give the Bard his due, saunter through scenes that should be tiptoed through, as in daisies. The stars are very talented indeed, and in the right vehicles they are wonderful; and the costars, John Cullum and Kathryn Walker, are both splendid in their parts. But the whimsy congeals nevertheless, because the rapid-fire delivery best suited to Noel Coward becomes in the Liz and Dick show an exercise in declaiming and screeching. Miss Taylor, to borrow a perfect phrase of Kevin Kelly's, for some reason lapses into a bit of Bette Davisizing, as in "I'm in! such! a! rage!" The play moves at three-quarter speed, and the sparkle is thereby dimmed. When in the second act Amanda and Elyot do their imitation of the Ali-Spinks title bout and go for what seems like 14 rounds, easy, the hideous image comes racing to mind: here is an ancient

hunter, languidly bouncing after a century-old elephant; he will get her in due course, and he's giving her a head start, but it won't be very exciting, just loud.

There are moments. She says, "Marriage scares me, really." The audience howls—you will howl—and she looks straight ahead for what seems like hours. Richard Burton has a voice to kill for, he looks wonderful, she sends chills up the spine just by appearing, you marvel that she doesn't break the furniture when she sits, and Noel Coward's dialogue, embedded tipsily in a structure of lace, is swell. So save your pennies and go: it's something to tell your grandchildren about.

Contributing Editor David Brudnoy reviews the arts for WNEV-TV (CBS) News and WRKO-AM and is film critic for several Boston-area newspapers. He hosts a nightly talk program on WRKO, writes regularly for the Boston Herald, and syndicates a newspaper column.

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THE NORTHERN MINER

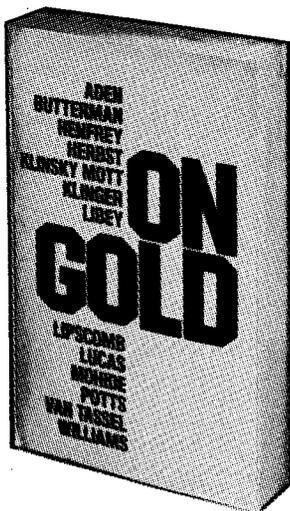
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Does Great Prosperity
Take Little Rebellions?The Rise and Decline of Nations:
Economic Growth, Stagflation and
Social Rigidities

By Mancur Olson

New Haven and London: Yale University
Press. 1982. 273 pp. \$14.95

Reviewed by Pierre Lemieux

How could it possibly happen that an auto worker who is willing to work to buy food cannot find a job, while there is a food-plant worker who wants a car in exchange for his production but has just been laid off? How can there be involuntary unemployment? *This* is the puzzling question.

Similarly, how can we explain underdevelopment? For, as economist Mancur Olson writes, "An economy with free markets and no government or cartel intervention... grows rapidly without special effort or encouragement"—witness Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, or all Western countries two centuries ago.

A University of Maryland professor, Mancur Olson is the well-known author of another seminal book, *The Logic of Collective Action* (1966), which provided the theoretical basis for his current analysis of the rise and decline of nations. Olson argues that individuals with a common interest will not voluntarily act collectively to further this interest unless each individual has a rational incentive to participate in such collective action. Whether the group action aims to lower taxes or repeal a tariff or set cartel prices, each individual will reason that the impact of his own participation will be negligible, while on the other hand he will automatically share in the benefits obtained by others who would bear the costs of participation.

The logic of collective action leads to more collective organization among small and homogeneous groups—for example, producers—than among large and diverse groups—for example, consumers. In a small coalition, the individuals' participation matters and the benefits are shared among fewer individuals. In addition, a relatively small and homogeneous group can more easily provide its members with private goods (such as group insurance) as incentives.

Since not all groups face comparable incentives to engage in collective action, it follows that "there will be no countries that attain symmetrical organization of all groups with a common interest and thereby attain optimal outcomes through competitive bargaining." This is Olson's first basic theorem. Moreover, it takes time and a stable environment for all the conditions and entrepreneurship neces-



Mancur Olson

sary for collective action to be organized. Whence the second theorem: "Stable societies with unchanged boundaries tend to accumulate more collusions and organizations for collective action over time."

These special-interest organizations are really *distributional* coalitions, contends Olson. Their incentives are such that they are "overwhelmingly oriented to struggles over the distribution of income and wealth rather than to the production of additional output." The reason is that the social cost of their actions is diffuse over the whole society, while benefits are concentrated among members.

Two hundred thousand textile producers and workers in, say, a nation of 20 million (roughly the Canadian case) will collectively pay only 1 percent of the social cost of protectionist measures, while they will get all the benefits. It will

therefore be in their interest to further protectionism *even if its social cost is as much as 100 times larger than its social benefits.*

Distributional coalitions achieve their purpose by obtaining legal and regulatory privileges from government, cartelizing wages and prices, and restricting competition. They thus increase the role of government, reduce the mobility of factors of production, slow down society's adaptation to change, and create rigidities in wages and prices. The third Olson theorem follows: distributional coalitions reduce efficiency, economic growth, and aggregate income, and they exacerbate economic contractions.

Consider the central problem of wage fixing by trade unions and, especially, the enforced wage fixing they obtain from government through minimum-wage laws. Like apprenticeship rules, minimum-wage rates are a device used by laborers' coalitions to keep out competition from the unemployed or underemployed. In this way, for example, white trade unions have successfully excluded competing black labor from supervisory jobs in South Africa.

As John Maynard Keynes saw, unemployment in a recession is basically caused by sticky wages that prevent the unemployed from bidding down wages. Instead of prices, quantities must adjust: real income drops, and employment takes the slack. But what Keynesians do not understand is that the more effective distributional coalitions are, the more severe the business cycle. Moreover, if inflation has become expected and has been built in through coalition-controlled wages and prices, these may continue to rise until employment has fallen even more, resulting in the modern phenomenon of stagflation.

Economist Phillip Cagan has shown that the tendency for prices to fall during a recession has declined over time. During the great US recession of the 19th century, in 1839-43, prices dropped 42 percent, compared to only 33 percent in 1929-33. The Great Depression of the 20th century, further exacerbated by protectionism and government price fixing, was the first business contraction to generate widespread unemployment. In 1839-43, real consumption actually increased by 16 percent, while it dropped by 19 percent in 1929-33.

Because of increasing rigidities caused by sprawling distributional coalitions, "as time goes on, a stable society suffers more unemployment and a greater loss of output for any given reduction in ag-