

# arts & letters

## MOVIES

Reviewed by John Hospers

### Tender Mercies

There isn't a lot of action in *Tender Mercies*, yet the telling of the simple story is so remarkable that the result is an unusually impressive film. Robert Duvall gives a low-keyed and subtle characterization as the ex-drunk handyman who becomes the husband of the widowed motel owner for whom he has been working; the story is largely one of their marriage, with its multiple resonances from



Struggling to renew his life, former alcoholic country-music star Mac Sledge (Robert Duvall) recalls a moment of past glory for his stepson, Sonny (Allan Hubbard), in *TENDER MERCIES*.

the past. Australian director Bruce Beresford (*Breaker Morant*) has done a superb job in his first American film. We absorb the feel of the monotonous Texas flatlands and the lives of the people against this setting, of the tacky rural motel that is the home of the principals, of the tawdry bars and ugly churches—all shown not as an outsider would view them but with the feeling-tone of the inhabitants themselves. We often see the characters from afar off, as tiny portions of an endless landscape, gaining thereby a better idea of what it is like to live there.

The characters seldom express their feelings in words; they are inadequate at verbal expression, and we infer their

feelings from subtle gesture and their mode of interaction with their environment. The un verbalized feelings of the characters are reflected in their positioning in the picture: there is always space between them, and in conversation they often look past rather than at one another. But the communication of their feelings to us is sharp and perceptive: when the new husband departs and doesn't come home after dark, the wife doesn't know whether he is out drinking after months of abstinence or seeing his ex-wife or daughter; she waits for him anxiously, and we see repeatedly the long vistas of highway, the flatlands extending into the far distance, the distant

sound of cars (each one passing without stopping), and again the darkening sky and the endless empty spaces. Anyone who has waited in vain for someone who is expected back feels the intensity of the anxiety, even without seeing the woman's face. On other occasions the viewer must pick up feelings from minimal cues in their behavior and is often left to draw his own conclusions about what they may be feeling.

The church and its members are not treated with the low-comedy contemptuousness one often sees today in films, but simply as a part of the pattern of their lives. When Duvall says, "Why did my daughter die while I was permitted to live?" his wife cannot answer within the

terms of her own religion, and she is silent. "I don't trust happiness," he muses. "I never did; I never will." And yet, from the mindless happenstance of nature—her sudden widowhood and his separation and his daughter's sudden death—there is a happiness, as well as love and pride, that slowly emerges, and whose effect remains with the viewer afterward. This film provides an unusual and worthwhile cinematic experience.

### The Outsiders

After his overambitious and pretentious projects such as *Apocalypse Now*, it is a welcome relief to see Francis Ford Coppola do a more modest film such as his current *The Outsiders*. Like *Tex*, it's about growing up, viewed so completely from the standpoint of the juveniles that there's scarcely an adult in the entire film. This film is not as focused as *Tex*, dealing as it does with three main characters rather than one, and the viewer's attention keeps shifting from one character to another. But the tale of youths who are forced by circumstances to be self-sufficient, and to deal with gang warfare along with all the other problems of growing up in Tulsa, has a ring of genuineness. The story, though sometimes too melodramatic, is absorbing. In spite of the fact that two of the three principal characters die, Coppola has succeeded in keeping the story from being depressing by enabling us to enter imaginatively the psyches of each of the principals in true cinematic fashion—that is, through actions and gestures and body language more than through words.

From an adult point of view, it must be added that not every one of the depicted crises tears the orderly fabric of the universe as much as it may seem to the characters involved. One sometimes feels, "This is overblown—they'll get over it," or, "This was a foolish and unnecessary mistake—this is their own fault, not the fault of circumstances." And thus the ability of a mere adult to identify imaginatively with the characters is somewhat limited. Not so, however, with the youngsters who constitute the vast majority of the audience for this film; their ability to empathize with the characters is, from all appearances, quite boundless.

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

**LANGUAGE**

**The Children  
Of the State**

By Richard Mitchell

*A general state education is a mere contrivance for moulding people to be exactly like one another; and the mould in which it casts them is that which pleases the predominant power in the government, whether this be a monarch, a priesthood, an aristocracy, or the majority of the existing generation. In proportion as it is efficient, it establishes a despotism over the mind, leading by natural tendency to one over the body.*

—John Stuart Mill

When I concluded once in the *Underground Grammarian* that the American government school system is exactly what Lenin ordered, certain readers imagined that I had gone too far. Later, when I concluded that religious schools are in no important way different from government schools, and that what Luther ordered was even more oppressive than what Lenin ordered, certain other readers imagined that I had gone too far.

In fact, however, I never have the space to go far enough. Of the inane pronouncements and the sentimental mantras of educationism, I ask one question, a question that should always be asked of any proposition, even the most familiar, especially the most familiar: If *this* is true, what *else* must be true? It is a little question with a big answer. It throws a wonderful ray of clear light into sunless stewes of superstition all the way from astrology to the affective domain.

To answer that question, however, is usually an exasperating chore. It's difficult enough to puzzle out exactly *what* the educationists are saying; *why* they say it, is, therefore, all the harder to construe. Often, after having worked out the logical, and horrible, implications of their dicta, we don't know whether to indict them for vice or for folly. It is thus a rare pleasure to discover an educationist who does not leave us in doubt.

He is a certain William H. Seawell, a professor of education at the University of Virginia, a paragon of clarity, a plain speaker in whom there is no mealy-mouthed, no obliquity, no jargon at all. "Each child," says William H. Seawell,

"belongs to the state." What could be clearer?

In saying that, Seawell, who is after all, a paid agent of the government of a state, was doing nothing more than what he is paid to do. That function is called, almost certainly by every government on the face of the Earth, "educating the people." But Seawell's forthrightness, in a matter that ordinarily puts educationists to pious pussy-footing, suggests that he is no mere time-server who is just following orders. He sounds like exactly the kind of agent that any government most prizes: a true believer.

And a brave one, too. For he also said, to an audience of mere citizens, gathered to "celebrate" the opening of yet another government schoolhouse in Fort Defiance, Virginia, that the purpose of "education" is "the training of citizens for the state so the state may be perpetuated."

Although Seawell probably holds to the orthodox educationist belief that truth and knowledge are only relative, he seems to have spoken as one who knew with absolute certainty that Jefferson had left Virginia forever and could not possibly be sitting quietly, horsewhip in hand, out in the dim back rows of the auditorium. It could only be out of some such certainty—although ignorance might serve as well—that a man would dare to admit that "public schools promote civic rather than individual pursuits" and to argue *from* that that "only public education can be used to gain a free society."

Fort Defiance, eh? Well, times have changed in Virginia. Our source, the *Staunton Leader*, a remarkably restrained newspaper, says nothing at all about the mere citizens' reaction to being educated by Seawell. We have to assume, however, that even the *Leader* would have made some brief mention of the fact if the man had been tarred and feathered and ridden out of Fort Defiance on a rail. So that probably didn't happen.

And that it didn't is witness to the efficacy of an "education" designed for the perpetuation of the state. Such an education must see to it that its victims are habitually inattentive to the meaning of the words and slogans in which they are educated. No one, it seems, muttered any tiny dissent when Seawell overruled the Constitution and appointed unto himself and his ilk the task that many Virginians might have deemed more suitable to other hands: "We must focus on creating citizens for the good of society."

So. We are now to hold *these* truths to

be self-evident: That all citizens are encumbered by the state that creates them with certain inevitable burdens, and that among these burdens are a life of involuntary servitude for the perpetuation of the state, the liberty to be required by law to learn from their creators the worth of the civic and the nastiness of the individual, and the assiduous pursuit—and this is Seawell's parting shot—of only those pastimes deemed (by agents of government, we guess) "productive."

Were there, among the impositions of George III upon the colonies, provisions more heinous and tyrannical than William H. Seawell's grand design for educating the people? Some eminently reasonable and well-educated men found King George's intentions nothing less than a "Design to reduce them under absolute Despotism," as a delegate from Virginia put it. But the king never claimed that he was the creator—and owner—of his subjects or that their *purpose* was the perpetuation of the State.

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He did not require the children to attend schools in which his hired agents would persuade them as to his notions about the "good of society." Nevertheless, and it suddenly seems strangely unaccountable, those thoughtful men took up arms against the king. Was it for *this* that they delivered us from *that*?

Richard Mitchell is the author of *Less Than Words Can Say* and publisher of the *Underground Grammarian*, from which this column is adapted.

## BOOKS

### Greasing the Wheels Of the Soviet Machine

#### Confiscated Power: How Soviet Russia Really Works

By Hélène Carrère d'Encausse.

Translated by George Holoch

New York: Harper & Row. 1982.

401 pp., \$19.95

#### USSR: The Corrupt Society

By Konstantin M. Simis.

Translated by Jacqueline Edwards and Mitchell Schneider

New York: Simon & Schuster. 1982.

316 pp., \$14.95

Reviewed by Edward Lozansky

Two new books about the Soviet Union have recently appeared. Hélène Carrère d'Encausse's *Confiscated Power* is actually not a new book but a translation from the French edition published several years ago. Although written in a strictly academic and therefore sometimes tedious manner, the book nevertheless provides, for an outsider, an unusually deep insight into historical and present-day Russia. Analyzing the historical, traditional, and cultural aspects of Russian society, Carrère d'Encausse searches out the reasons why Russia became a laboratory for the horrible experiment on humans called communism. But the main subject of her research is to show how the Bolsheviks were able to seize power in 1917 and how Russia—or, more precisely, the Soviet Union—has been governed since then.

Was power ever *confiscated* from the people of Russia? It would have had to belong to them for more than a few hours. But as the author herself states, "the Bolsheviks *seized* the power that the revolutionary masses had taken." The

promise of a "dictatorship of the proletariat" was fulfilled in a different way from that expected: by allegedly embodying society, the Communist Party also had the right and duty to detain all powers.

In an attempt to understand the Soviet scene at the end of Brezhnev's era, Carrère d'Encausse first examines what it inherited from the past. Problems entailed by economic modernization and World War I, and a tradition of authoritarian power linked to a dictatorial phenomenon developing in Europe, provided a favorable context for the birth of what was to become the Soviet Union. Although the author acknowledges the fact that this dictatorship outlived its European counterparts, she fails to mention the dissimilarities between totalitarianism and authoritarianism.

Carrère d'Encausse's survey of the Russian legacy includes an examination of Stalin's personality cult and the terror



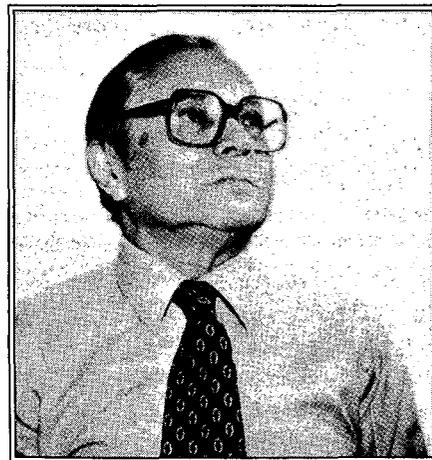
Hélène Carrère d'Encausse

that left the country in a state of fear and complete inertia. Khrushchev's daring attempt at reformism awoke the country's consciousness. Though later repressed, it is still alive, as Carrère d'Encausse likes to recall upon studying the relationships between power and society under Brezhnev.

Unfortunately, the English-edition subtitle—*How Soviet Russia Really Works*—does not express the author's main concern as well as the French subtitle, which, in an approximate translation was, "those who govern; those who are governed." Relationships between power and society in Soviet Russia have changed since 1917 not because power has changed but because the society has

new requirements. Power is still dominated by the leading role of the Communist Party and the indispensable need for party spirit (*Partiinost*).

In discussing the possibility of change, Carrère d'Encausse asserts that hope lies in society rather than in the leaders. She does not, however, tell us how this change might occur. Should it commence from within or outside the system, and from within or outside the country,



Konstantin Simis

perhaps with the action of émigrés?

Though *Confiscated Power* was published three years ago in France, and it is unfortunate that it is only coming out in the American version in 1983, it remains a good book for anyone unfamiliar with Soviet organization of power and "participation" of society. The facts are not new, but they are well explained.

Konstantin Simis's *USSR: The Corrupt Society* is, frankly, much more interesting. It is written by a professional Soviet lawyer who lived and worked in the Soviet Union for over 60 years and who dealt on a day-to-day basis with the corruption that penetrates practically all layers of Soviet society: from the Politburo to the drunken peasant on the collective farm. The facts presented in the book are not sensational or even new to the Western public. We hear and read about these things from time to time. But probably for the first time we now have a systematic description of the corruption and the corrupted in the Soviet Union among the ruling elite, police, the courts, district mafia, educators, the medical profession, underground entrepreneurs, industrial workers—you name it.

Corruption was not invented by Bolsheviks. It has in Russia flourished during almost its entire history. But the Communists can certainly take the blame