

# SR Goes to the Movies

Arthur Knight

## M as in Mature

ONE OF the difficulties that Jack Valenti is experiencing in his administration of the industry's new Production Code and its letter ratings is the rather imprecise line between a G film (for general audiences) and an M film (for mature ones). Part of this imprecision is on the community level; in some states, sixteen is the threshold to maturity, while elsewhere one must wait until eighteen for the great crossing over. But a more basic confusion is the code administrators' curious guidelines as to what constitutes a film that is suitable for a general, or family, audience. They seem to rate pictures largely in terms of visible nudity and sexual play. No nudity, G; some nudity, M; lots of nudity, R—and so on.

Now, this may make for a handy rule of thumb, but it has little relevance to any question of true maturity; and I offer in evidence a new film from France with the rather titillating title *My Night at Maud's* (*Ma Nuit chez Maud*). In it there is not a moment of nudity—although, to be fair, Maud does announce her preference for sleeping in the nude, and presumably does so on the night in question. It's a cold night, however, and she sleeps with the blankets pulled tight about her shoulders. She even shares her bed with the philosophical young engineer who is the hero of the film—but he has his own blanket and sleeps above her covers.

But do these niceties make *My Night at Maud's* a film for a general audience? Not at all. Indeed, it is probably the most thoroughly mature film that has come to the screen in years. There is nothing in the picture that the kiddies shouldn't hear, but by the same token there is precious little in it that they would understand. For that matter, a good many adults who normally go to the movies for a few hours of harmless, painless entertainment might well find themselves confused and bored by it. Its appeal is intellectual, delighting in paradox, contradiction, dialectic, and "mathematical expectation," which makes the film's neat and unlikely finale seem not illogical.

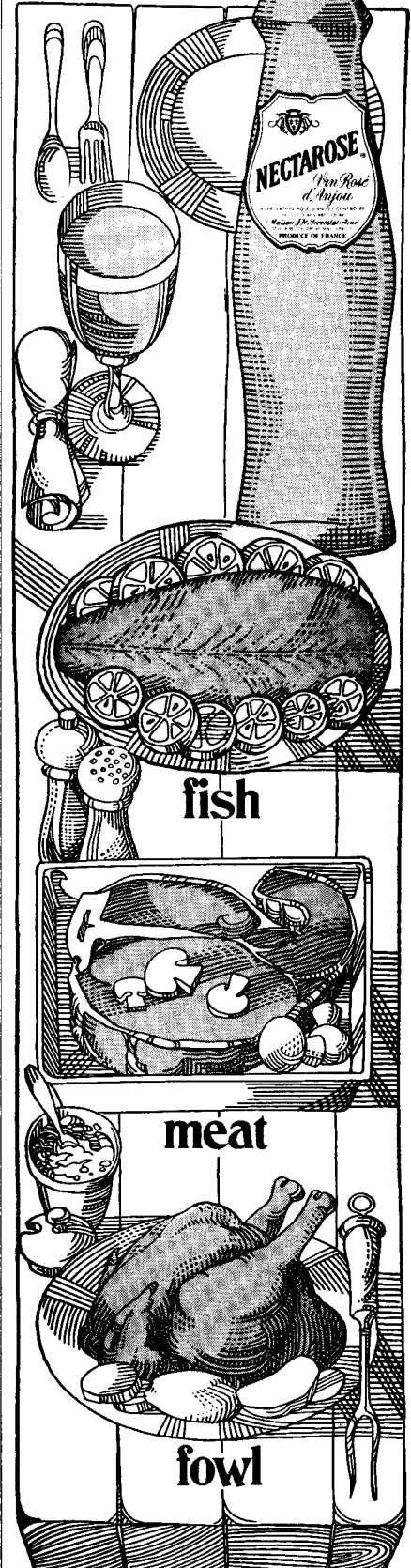
The setting is a provincial town in France, neither drab nor picturesque, whose life revolves about the church and the university. To it has come, from Vancouver and Valparaiso, an engineer who is a devout Catholic and student of Pascal. (The *Pensées* figure importantly throughout the film.) He meets an old friend, now a professor of philo-

sophy at the university and a Marxist. They talk, attend concerts, and ultimately visit Maud, an attractive divorcée and an atheist. More talk, and in a spirit of gamesmanship (and also to bring to a conclusion his own, unsatisfactory affair with the woman) the professor arranges to have his friend spend the night with Maud. However, the engineer had been pursuing a blonde and, quite unexpectedly, runs into her on his way home from Maud's. Maud leaves town; he marries the blonde.

Obviously, as story, this is pretty thin stuff. But, as written and directed by Eric Rohmer, the story is little more than a skeleton upon which to hang his philosophical observations. The result is not unlike a Shaw play, with acuteness of perception and precision of logic substituting for wit. And even this might be dismissed as having little to do with cinema were it not for the entrancing, underplayed performances of Jean-Louis Trintignant, Françoise Fabian, and Antoine Vitez in the three central roles; and, more especially, Rohmer's own uncanny instinct for where the camera should be looking and for how long—and how to keep a background alive while we still concentrate on the word. (Special mention should be made of associate producer Pierre Cottrell's superb titling job, compressing complex ideas into brief, clear subtitles.) *My Night at Maud's* may be caviar for the general (or G), but for that mature (or M) audience, it is pure Malisol.

Another imported delight is a gentle, modest, exceedingly droll little comedy from Czechoslovakia entitled *Intimate Lighting*. A first film by Ivan Passer (who scripted the successful *Loves of a Blonde*), it reflects that same outpouring of humanism that for a season or two, before the "freeze," pervaded so much of the Czech cinema. Passer's own approach combines this with the kind of wry observation of human foibles and downright foolishness that characterized the early René Clair comedies. The picture seemingly has something to do with a cellist from Prague who arrives with his mistress to give a concert in his home town, the concert to be presided over by an old school friend who now heads the local conservatory. Little happens in the way of plot but everything in the way of people. Since the film was completed four years ago, one can only wonder if the life depicted is still so earthy and carefree. And hope.

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# World of Dance

Walter Terry

## "The Sunbeam Will Outlast Us All"

EVANSTON, ILL.

IN THE DAYS when Sybil Shearer elected to depart briefly from her beloved Middle West for rare appearances in New York City (and she gave precious little warning of an impending arrival), the dance critics would accurately report that if the roof had fallen in on whatever theater she had engaged (Carnegie, the Brooklyn Academy of Music, a Broadway house on a Sunday afternoon), there would be no American dance left the next day. For Miss Shearer, modern dance maverick, would attract a who's-who-in-American-dance audiences. "What do you suppose Sybil will do *this* time?" was heard on every lip. And at the close of the matinee, having ensorcelled everyone present, Miss Shearer would depart, leaving behind a clear statement that she was unpredictable in everything except her sweet independence, her dedication, and a vibrant, radiant, growing, living, mutating, probing, revealing dance creativity rare even in the highest echelons of art.

Miss Shearer no longer comes to us in the East; we, and the rest of the dance devotees, come to her little theater (the 800-seat Arnold) at the National College of Education, where she has been artist-in-residence since 1962. To this theater with its glorious stage for dancers (45 by 52 feet) come Shearer admirers from as far away as Los Angeles and Miami, and from countless cities in between.

It is not at all easy for Miss Shearer's legion of followers to get to see her dance. She sometimes postpones programs if she feels that not everything, including her own spirit, is in readiness; and she adds performances on short notice. She is now midway in what is expected to be a total of six appearances (one in Milwaukee), and we have slogged and mushed her way in near-blizzards, gales, and sub-zero weather.

Sybil Shearer? She's worth every inconvenience.

How to describe her? For thirty years (and she hasn't changed a bit in appearance), since she left important assignments with the Humphrey-Weidman company and with Agnes de Mille in order to go her own dance way, she has defied description. She uses very little, or no, makeup; her hair is uncoifed, yet she uses cos-



—Helen Morrison.

Sybil Shearer—"dance creativity rare even in the highest echelons of art."

tumes that range from the simplest white frock to brilliant-colored fanciful dress and headdress; there are times when she stands on one spot, perhaps on one leg, and only her arms move, accompanied by a ripple of the upper torso; and there are other occasions when she speeds across the stage, kicks high and free, or spins like a dervish.

One of her programs, some years ago, was listed simply as "Dance I," "Dance II," etc., and yet others will have dances named with poetry, with wit, with an almost childlike profundity of understanding: "The spark is the child of flame," "Dead wood cannot be used for building," "Stamping won't dent the world," "Without wings the way is steep," "All is not gold but almost," or the concluding solo in her current *Fables and Proverbs* program for soloist (herself) and her company, "The sunbeam will outlast us all."

She is one of the world's foremost modern dancers, yet she doesn't believe in a modern dance schooling. "It's a style of movement," she says, "not a technique." Her company has classes in ballet—the strict Cecchetti method—and she herself (Muriel Stuart of the School of American Ballet was a favorite ballet teacher) keeps her ankles strong by occasionally practicing in toe shoes.

How to explain Sybil Shearer? She

met the late Ruth St. Denis when "Miss Ruth" was in her seventies. They were, superficially, separated by more than a generation, by the elaborateness of a St. Denis presentation and the almost stark simplicity of a Shearer one, by exotic ritual and Shearer's down-on-the-farm elementalism. But they found a sharing in a devotion to beauty, a detesting of inequity, and an identification with nature that has made them something more than man himself. Miss Ruth not only saw her beloved mountains, she *felt* them; and Miss Shearer not only looks at her trees, she is one with them. The total, not the selfish, pulse of life has motivated both. Perhaps this is the closest one can come to describing the Shearer message.

In "Without wings the way is steep," your own body experiences, emphatically, the steady struggle to climb, to reach out, to get there (the where doesn't matter); and in her "All is not gold but almost," she makes you laugh, chuckle, and roar as the fanciful, tinselled creature hops from light pool to light pool in search of an alchemy that will turn brass to gold.

The music Miss Shearer uses for herself and for her company is drawn from every possible source—Prokofiev, Poulenc, Brant, Weill, avant-garde composers, jazz, etc.—and is selected because it serves dancing. The lighting and staging are by her long-time colleague, Helen Morrison, and in both areas, Mrs. Morrison's own skills, her sensitivity to dance, and her rapport with Miss Shearer's unique art expressions represent her own claim to genius.

The Sybil Shearer Company is well disciplined, attractive, admirable; but although it is presumably of professional estate, there is the air of the amateur about it. Miss Shearer's choreography for group is well executed, but one rarely feels the sense of involvement with the subject matter that Shearer herself communicates in her solos, or even the unorthodox and disarming theatricality that the star herself projects.

Miss Shearer may be elusive as far as mere verbal descriptions are concerned—perhaps, she is rather like the title of another of her dances, "The message is in the wind," but I promise you that she is as genuine as the wind and that her message is as varied, as real, as gentle, and as powerful as that of the unseen wind itself. Sybil Shearer will not come to you, but if the portents are right, you will find her dancing February 8 in Evanston, March 8 in Milwaukee, and, perhaps, one more time in late March or April in Evanston.