

Films

Intimate Epic

BY ARTHUR KNIGHT

Perhaps it would be well to explain at the outset that I'm not particularly fond of film biographies. I seem to recall dozens of movies, most of them starring Paul Muni or Spencer Tracy, all cut from the same whole cloth. Our hero is about to invent electricity or penicillin, or do something else of inestimable value to all mankind—but he is surrounded by doubting Thomases. "It'll never get off the ground," his neighbors mutter. "Don't go to the underground meeting tonight," his girlfriend pleads. "You'll break your mother's heart," his father contributes (or vice versa). But the young man persists and wins a Nobel Prize for his efforts. Such is the pattern for these pictures, with our hero on a pedestal and the director on his knees.

Happily, this is not the case with *Young Winston*, even though the film is based on the autobiographical recollections of Winston Churchill, as told in *My Early Life*. No small part of this difference is due to Carl Foreman's adroitly knit script, which never fails to pay the deference owed to a man of pedigree but which refuses to take him at face value. Churchill was a driven man, goaded by his father's indifference to him and to his political career. He was also ambitious, eager to seize every advantage that might win him attention—and votes. At the same time he had inordinate courage; he was willing to risk not merely his reputation but his life in the interest of his own advancement. Was he merely a careerist? Which of the outstanding events of his youthful years were based on strong belief, and which were merely for show? Foreman creates an intriguing ambiguity that always suggests more than he says.

One way in which Foreman accomplishes this is by introducing, as a kind of willful anachronism, an off-screen reporter who at various points in the film interviews the main characters—Churchill's father and mother and young Winston himself. Not only do these sequences, daringly conceived, convey a great deal of information; they also set off reverberations that are quite outside the story itself but serve

to foreshadow the Churchill to come. There is a marvelous moment, for example, when young Winston, back from the Sudan, insolently turns his interrogator's insolent questions back into his teeth. Even the set speeches have been hewed and honed by Foreman to be integral to the developing character of Churchill and never simply embellishments.

To be sure, this is still Carl Foreman of *The Guns of Navarone*, with its enormous action sequences alternated with moments of introspection and repose. But whereas in the earlier epic the action dominated to good effect, in this one the viewer is eager to have done with the cavalry charges, the attack on the armored train, the hair's breadth escape from the Boers, in order to see again at length the intellectual and psychic development of young Churchill. In *Young Winston* Foreman has created the anomaly of all time—the action film in which the action is subordinate to the gradual emergence of the central character. Foreman takes for granted that we know all about the adult Churchill but yet would like to see how he became the man he was. The war scenes—particularly the attack on the train—recall the epic moments of *Lawrence of Arabia*; but this is, as director Richard Attenborough described it, "the first truly intimate epic," and the marvel is that it remains an epic even in its quieter moments.

With all respect to Foreman's script—perhaps the best of his distinguished career—none of this would have been possible without the performance of Simon Ward in the leading role. Attenborough and his staff interviewed some 400 actors before settling on Ward; after seeing the film, one can't possibly imagine anyone else in the part. His face looks just like the youthful portraits of Churchill, and substantiating the facial resemblance is a steady accumulation of Churchillian traits—the measured stride, the hands on hips, the jaunty cigar. Ward creates a portrait, dynamic yet sensitive, that must go down in movie annals as the most authoritative of all time.

Not far behind Ward are Robert Shaw and Anne Bancroft as Lord and Lady Randolph Churchill, Winston's parents. Lord Randolph, a bold and brilliant politician, finished his days as an irritable, often irrational, syphilitic; his degeneration is depicted by Shaw

with heart-rending sympathy and consummate skill. For the true meaning of "intimate epic," watch the scene in which Lord Churchill orders his young son from the table for banging the breakfast dishes, then tries tentatively to make contact again with the boy over a table of toy soldiers. Or the cuts to the face of Anne Bancroft as she listens to her son making his first speech in Parliament.

It would be so easy to let either of these scenes slide into sheer sentimentality, but both actors resist—and so does the director. Possibly because the director is himself an actor and has some thirty years' experience, he knows how to resist cheap effects in emotional scenes. His concern is with the truth of his characters in all their multi-layered complexity, and it extends to characters with only a line or two, such as Lord Salisbury (Laurence Naismith) or the doctor (Robert Flemyng) who must inform Lady Randolph of her husband's condition. No matter how large or small the roles, these people shine through as human beings, and this makes them all the more remarkable when we come to the action passages. *Young Winston* is a film that will be—or should be—remembered for many years to come.

Far less successful is Ken Russell's latest film, *Savage Messiah*, a biographical account of the last years of French Vorticist Henri Gaudier-Brzeska. Russell gained his reputation through the vital biographies of artists and composers that he created for British television. But his film *The Music Lovers*, for all its virtuosity, raised the question of where Tchaikovsky left off and Russell began. *Savage Messiah* raises a similar question but without the breathtaking imagery of the earlier film to redeem it. Gaudier-Brzeska, as portrayed by Scott Antony, is merely a posturing loudmouth who hooked up with an older woman, betrayed her repeatedly, acted outrageously toward his benefactors, and marched off to be killed in World War I. No matter what Russell had in mind, his film gives us no reason to agonize over the artist even though, intellectually, we may regret that he had to die prematurely. Despite Dorothy Tutin's skilled performance, we can't even feel sorry for Gaudier-Brzeska's presumptive wife; she had to be sicker than he was. As usual with Ken Russell films, the settings are very stylish. □

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Dance

Divine Clown And Other Dance Winners

BY WALTER TERRY

Maurice Béjart, one of the most controversial choreographers today, prefers arenas, circuses, and gardens to opera houses or theaters. Recently his Ballet of the 20th Century (the official dance company of the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels) came to New York City's vast Felt Forum in the even vaster Madison Square Garden to show us Béjart's newest spectacle, *Nijinsky, Clown of God*, a production involving ninety performers, giant puppets and masks, an incredible array of lights, ramps, hundreds of costumes, three Crucifixion-style crosses, music ranging from Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* to electronic sounds, and an amplified voice declaiming words written by Nijinsky during his years of madness.

The ballet, if that's what it is, is a fantasia based on the career of the great dancer and a psychological exploration of a tormented being who fled the protective relationship with the master impresario of the Ballets Russes, Sergei Diaghilev, for love of a woman, marriage, insanity—and the end of his career.

If you go for tasteful and imaginative steps or skillful *enchainments* in ballet, Béjart is not your man; but if you permit yourself to be overwhelmed by spectacle and find fascination in the relating of sensual physicalities to the tortured spirit of man himself, Béjart has a message for you. He reaches the applauding, cheering young by the thousands in Europe and America, while their seniors look bewildered or glum or even boo.

Attendance was light but enthusiasm high during the run of *Nijinsky, Clown of God* at Felt Forum. There was no disagreement about the superbly disciplined performers: about the portrayal by the nearly nude Jorge Donn of Nijinsky stripped to his very soul; about the four costumed male dancers who recreated the legendary dancer in evocations of *Petrouchka*, *Schéhérazade*, *Le Spectre de la Rose*, and *Afternoon of a Faun*; or about America's own Suzanne Farrell as The Woman.

I saw *Nijinsky* twice and I'm glad I did. The first time I found it visually striking but dramatically pretentious, with Act II going downhill fast. The second time it got through to me—or I to it.

Ballet of a more conventional, but nonetheless stirring, sort was to be seen in our nation's capital and on a coast-to-coast tour, courtesy of the National Ballet, based in Washington, D. C. The troupe, codirected by Frederic Franklin (an internationally acclaimed star of an earlier ballet era) and Ben Stevenson (one of today's most versatile choreographers), has never danced better. It performed without benefit of such guest stars as Dame Margot Fonteyn and held its own nicely. But why not? Six of its dancers won medals last summer at the International Ballet Competition in Varna, Bulgaria, and Stevenson earned a medal for choreography.

In the current repertory, aside from that old-time spectacle, *The Sleeping Beauty*, audiences are savoring Franklin's tender and lovely restaging of the Fokine masterpiece *Les Sylphides*; Stevenson's new *Bartók Concerto* (Third Piano Concerto), a beautiful abstract ballet that hints at love and nature, sunshine and remembrance; and *Harlequinade Pas de Deux* (Drigo), a virtuosic blockbuster and the piece that won Stevenson his award at Varna.

In New York, as the City Center Joffrey Ballet's annual six-week fall season drew to a close, a final premiere, *Sacred Grove on Mount Tamalpais*, came along to put a temporary damper on an otherwise effervescent engagement. The new piece is a semimodernization of those old ceremonies in which people gathered to celebrate love, harvests, rebirth, and fertility in general. The new Gerald Arpino piece is rock music-oriented, but it is nowhere nearly as good as his rock masterwork *Trinity*.

At the City Center American Dance Marathon '72 at the ANTA Theater, involving eighteen companies and two soloists, you might have encountered rag instead of rock, thanks to Twyla Tharp and her company in *The Raggedy Dances*, a carefree, often amusing, seemingly improvisational hoofing spree. And as for sacred groves and their cousins, Erick Hawkins and his fine dancers were way in front with such serene, pictorially satisfying rites as *Angels of the Inmost Heaven*, *Dawn Dazzled Door*, and *Classic Kite Tails*. □