

SR The Arts

Burning the Nostalgia at Both Ends

by Judith Crist

The homage to Hollywood's past continues, on rare occasions with savvy and taste, though more often these days with venal vulgarity by the young and/or ignorant wallowing in some sort of movie mythology.

The savvy comes from producer George Barrie, who brought us Mel Frank's slickly sophisticated update of *Brief Encounter* a couple of years ago, aptly titled *A Touch of Class*. Now he brings us another update, this time of those fluffy domestic-triangle comedies of the Thirties and Forties, *I Will, I Will . . . For Now*, co-authored and directed by Norman Panama, Frank's longtime Hollywood partner. And if it's not quite so classy as its predecessor, it still has the same old-fashioned appeal that made moviegoers of us in the first place: high-style performances, plenty of affluent chic, and lots of laughs wrapped around a story about nice people bumbling their way to happiness.

The nice people in this Panama-Albert E. Lewin concoction are a divorced couple who decide to try togetherness again, this time by contract marriage and, when that proves as wracking and antagonistic as the old-fashioned way, by resorting to sex books, marriage counseling, and, finally, a posh sex clinic. On the sidelines are their best friend, a lawyer with an eye on the wife, and, in a neighboring apartment, a "November centerfold" with an eye on the husband. And along the way there's a cheery, witty, and perceptive consideration of where compatibility lies, in and out of bed and with and without all the shibboleths and pop panaceas that are part of the childish games grown-up people play.

Elliott Gould, back to his original style of adult comedy rather than kookery, is first-rate as the compulsive-gambler, girl-chasing husband; Diane Keaton glows as the wife who is hung up on clean ashtrays and dirty words;

Paul Sorvino makes the lawyer competent and appealing; and Victoria Principal does much for the status of centerfolds. Under Panama's light hand the cast ranges from Cowardly comedy to bedroom farce with bright lines, deft drama, occasional slapstick, and complete likability. It's enough to set the old nostalgia burning.

Gable and Lombard is enough to set the stomach churning. If you are interested in the actual lives of these two stars of the Thirties, you might read a Dell paperback entitled *Gable & Lombard & Powell & Harlow* by Joe Morella and Edward Z. Epstein and get not only their story but that of Jean Harlow and William Powell as well, along with a fascinating account of Hollywood in their time, all for \$1.50. Presuming, for no obvious reason, that they are literate, scriptwriter Barry Sandler and director Sidney J. Furie might have made the investment and found the truth far more entertaining than the sleazy fictions they have invented to titillate the ignorant and the gullible. Suffice it that they have reduced the relationship of two major celebrities to a 131-minute history of fornication between a department-store dummy and a foulmouthed floozie. If James Brolin, known to TV fans as Marcus Welby's stooge, and Jill Clayburgh, an otherwise able actress, had any star charisma of their own, of course, they might be able to impersonate stars. As it is, Brolin is all salami and Clayburgh is about as impressive as Carroll Baker was in her day in portraying Harlow—although one worries that poor Jill may have contracted a case of putty poisoning from nibbling on Brolin's fake Gable-esque ears. All involved give performances to match the idiotic obscenity of the script, and Furie, who most recently trashed *Sheila Levine*, follows suit in his direction. The filmmakers obviously waited until all the principals were dead before perpetrating their libel—but their primary presump-

tion is that taste and intelligence have died as well.

At the very least John Byrum's *Inserts* is an honest fiction-fantasy about Hollywood in the Thirties, right down to having Clark Gable, "the new kid over at Pathé," as an off-stage character. Byrum, a recent scriptwriter (co-author of *Mahogany*) and neophyte director, has come up with an offbeat, interesting, but ultimately unsatisfying tale of a director who had a brilliant future but "fulfilled it at an early age" and was then reduced to swilling brandy and making porno movies in his decaying mansion. The five-character, one-set film offers a day in the director's life, in the course of which his leading lady, an ex-starlet in "real" movies, dies of an overdose of heroin; his bootlegger-turned-producer and his leading man, an undertaker's assistant who's convinced he has "star potential,"



Keaton and Gould—"A witty consideration of where compatibility lies."

dispose of the body; and the director almost recovers his potency with the producer's "fiancée," whose ladylike lusts prove purely cinematic. Byrum's primary triumph is in a superb quartet of actors—Jessica Harper as the Gish-like fiancée, Stephen Davies as the stud, Bob Hoskins as the thug-producer, and Veronica Cartwright simply stunning as the junkie. He is less fortunate with his star, Richard Dreyfuss, who is too young for even Boy Wonder status and is self-indulgent in an undisciplined role that calls for wearying "witties," continuous drinking, and endless hamming. But Byrum does provide some brilliant flashes of black

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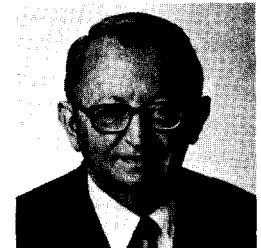
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comedy and an "in" sense of moviemaking. His is a tantalizing first film that shows interesting potential.

France's Robin Davis makes a completely satisfying directorial debut with *Cher Victor*, acclaimed at last year's Cannes and San Francisco festivals. At the latter it was aptly described as "something like *The Odd Couple* as it might have been written by Alfred Hitchcock," though my own fancy is that it's a Roald Dahl version of *The Sunshine Boys*. But simply credit Davis, co-author with Patrick Laurent, for his straightforward story of Anselme and Victor, two 60ish pensioners living together in incompatibility. Anselme, plumply portrayed by Bernard Blier, is the bachelor housekeeper, good-natured and sensitive; Victor, nervily played by Jacques Dufilho, is an irascible and domineering widower, riding his friend's tolerance to the breaking point. And when the breaking point comes, hilariously and heartbreakingly, the worm turns with a vengeance worthy of a Machiavelli. The characters are beautifully developed, and there is no uncertain moment as the comedic mood turns slowly into one of terror and a horror story unfolds amid arias, family visits, seduction scenes (*Alida Valli* is superb as a retired opera star who entralls Anselme), and a local music-society luncheon. Davis is completely in control of his medium—and of his audience, to its delight.

Albert and David Maysles achieve a remarkable subtlety in their new non-fiction feature film, *Grey Gardens*, an intimate study of Edith Bouvier Beale and her daughter, aunt and cousin of Jacqueline Onassis, renowned as the recluses of East Hampton, L.I. Big Edie, at 79, spends most of her time in bed in a room cluttered with hot plate, refrigerator, memorabilia, and the eight official household cats, while Little Edie, 57, roams the 28-room house, tends the raccoon in the attic, suns herself, and attempts dance routines. Both are handsome and articulate—Mrs. Beale had trained for the concert stage, Edie had hoped for a Broadway break—and they obviously revel in the Maysleses' project. And once you overcome your own embarrassment at their willing self-exposure, you are free not only to observe an extraordinary life-style but also to understand human bondage in its elemental stage by way of a relationship that makes *The Glass Menagerie* seem like a drawing-room comedy in comparison. □

Dance

Ballet Unadorned

George Balanchine is the greatest, and most elegant, strip artist of them all. It has been his special genius, over the past decades, to rediscover and redirect the viewer's attention to the movement of ballet, movements stripped of all trappings. Perhaps his company, the New York City Ballet, has concentrated too much and too often on ballets without story, without scenery, and without elaborate costumes, but for the best of ballet that is pure and spare and unadorned, you will most often find it with the New York City Ballet, and, most certainly, in the works of Balanchine.

He began his stripping a long time ago. One of his enduring masterworks in this idiom is *Concerto Barocco* (Bach's Concerto in D minor for Two Violins). It isn't baroque at all, but it once was—when it was first presented, with scenery and incredibly elaborate costumes by Eugene Berman, by the American Ballet (ancestor of the NYCB) in 1941. When it was given by the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo in 1945, Balanchine staged it with simple ballet practice clothes (black and white) only. Balanchine's *The Four Temperaments* (Hindemith), when presented by Ballet Society (the immediate forerunner of NYCB) in 1946, had elaborate surrealist costumes and scenery by Kurt Seligmann. These were discarded in 1952 in favor of standard practice clothes.

Concerto Barocco and *Four's T's*, unadorned, remain flawless examples of classical ballet, and they probably always will. The former is almost totally traditional in step and stance, and the latter is an extension of ballet into newer areas of motor expression and design.

Truthfully, when new ballets of this genre keep coming from the prolific Balanchine, one can occasionally murmur, "Oh, no, not again." But then the master turns up with a masterpiece of stripping, as he did recently with *Chaconne* (to ballet music from Gluck's *Orphée et Euridice*). The ballet is derived from an opera ballet that Balanchine did for the Hamburg State Opera

by Walter Terry

in 1963. Then, within the opera itself, it had elaborate costumes. For the NYCB presentation, the strip-master has peeled off everything to reveal the unencumbered movements of his dancers' bodies. The result is captivating.

Watching *Chaconne*, one has the curious feeling that he is being permitted to peek beneath the costumes of courtiers, not as a voyeur but as a connoisseur. Here are *pas de deux*, *pas de trois*, *pas de cinq*, and the concluding *chaconne* (usually the extended finale of Gluck operas) evocative of those court dances from which ballet evolved. Without hooped skirts, puffed sleeves, awesome farthingale constructions, plumes, doublets, and whatnot, we can see what actually happened underneath all the rich impedimenta. And it is all lovely.

Of course, Balanchine has not simply reproduced the steps, the gestures, the *révérences* of courtly dances—he has shown us the evolutions of those forms into ballet—but he has also retained all of the elegance, much of the form, and hints of the formalities. Louis Horst, the modern-dance composer and authority on pre-classic dance forms, once wrote of the *chaconne*, "When the court tired of it, it found a place on the stage." As staged by a master, the Balanchine *Chaconne* will never grow tiresome.

THE BALANCHINE SCHOOL of music-visualization ballets has long influenced other choreographers, veterans as well as newcomers. Among the very newest choreographers is Bruce Wells, a former dancer—and a splendid one—with the NYCB. His first choreographic ambitions have found an outlet with the little (fewer than a dozen dancers) but thriving Connecticut Ballet Company, directed by Robert Vickrey.

For the New Haven-based troupe, Wells created *Canon in D Major*, a duet for himself and the delightful Robin Welch (Mrs. Vickrey). It is a flashy piece, effective in fits and starts. Wells comes up with some highly original (he does not imitate Balanchine) and exuberant actions, but the sense of form sometimes eludes him as he coasts from idea to idea. The piece is set to music of Johann Pachelbel. His second work, danced by the Connecticut Ballet, is called *Renaissance Dances* and bounds

Answer to *Will Twister* (see page 23): float, float, float.