

Judith Crist

Old Formulas Never Die

Castles may crumble and crowned—or studio—heads may tumble, but that old Hollywood truism, adapted abroad and by Broadway over the years, remains: If at first you *do* succeed, you do it again and again and again . . . and nobody looks for a motive beyond the dollar sign.

Thus in the spring of 1981 we get the fourth film version of James M. Cain's brilliantly terse 188-page first novel, **The Postman Always Rings Twice**, a tale of lust, greed, murder (to delight the tub-thumper), and retribution (to delight the moralist). MGM bought the property soon after its publication in 1934, but the sex and violence proved a bit heady for the Hays office and it was shelved until 1946. By then Cain himself had written a stage version (produced on Broadway in 1936 with Richard Barthelmess, Mary Philips, and Joseph Greenwald); a French film version, *Le Dernier Tournant* with Fernand Gravet, Corinne Luchaire, and Michel Simon, had been produced in 1939 but never shown here; and in 1942, with disregard for copyright and film rights, Luchino Visconti had made his feature directorial debut with *Ossessione*. Barred from this country until 1975, *Ossessione* is a gritty and turgid adaptation more significant as the model for the Italian neo-realist school.

By 1946 the Production Code was adapting itself to a postwar world; besides, two subsequent Cain novels

had been filmed into box-office bonanzas: *Double Indemnity*, in 1944, and *Mildred Pierce*, a year later. And so the first American film version of *Postman* was made in what James Agee described at the time as "a depth of seriousness incompatible with the material, complicated by a paralysis of fear of the front office." This he found a major interest, because "it is what can happen, especially in Hollywood, if you are forced to try both to eat your cake and have it, and don't realize that it is, after all, only good pumpernickel." Agee, who found the film "mainly a terrible misfortune from start to finish," applauded, however, its view of "the Law as an invincibly corrupt and terrifying force before which mere

ing, internalized performance, even pleased by (or unaware of) the transformation of Cain's arrogant Greek immigrant into Cecil Kellaway's jolly sub-surface-mean Englishman as the cuckolded husband-victim. And the film became a semi-classic of the tough black-and-white slick, commercial films of the Forties.

Thirty-five years later *Postman* has been given a class production, with Bob Rafelson (to be honored for *Five Easy Pieces*, if not *The King of Marvin Gardens* and *Stay Hungry*) as coproducer and director; playwright David Mamet making his screenwriting debut; Jack Nicholson our latter-day Garfield; Jessica Lange (best known as the lady in the latter-day King



A murder is staged in another remake of *The Postman Always Rings Twice*.

Kong's mechanical hand, emerging, Turner-like, as an actress) and John Colicos returning the husband to his Cain-given nationality. And it has the "realism" that today's screen allows, primarily in the Depression-era setting (a flaw in the earlier film set in 1946) that motivates and underlines the characters' aspirations and frustrations and that Sven Nykvist's cinematography brings to muted and moody life.

And we can, of course, face the facts of life and Cain that the Forties couldn't. Not

victims, whether innocent or guilty, can only stand helpless and aghast." Other contemporary critics were less socially conscious, bowled over by Lana Turner's emergence as actress, satisfied as always by John Garfield's dark, brood-

only the Law and its officers are corrupt—but even the insurance companies that were Cain's particular interest. And, of course, the old Sex and Violence can get their due. The intricacies of the love-hate relationship come



Lana Turner and John Garfield (left) as fated lovers in the 1946 *Postman*. Nicholson and Lange play it steamier in 1981.

clear, the near-anger and edginess of obsession underlying even placid moments. Lange's blowsy sensuality and Nicholson's twitchy raunchiness are such that Cain's "smell" of sexuality emanates from her sulky languors and the boorishness of her lover's appetites, permeating their recurring tensions, eventually saturating the screen.

The Mamet screenplay takes a few liberties, such as indulging to small purpose in a Greek party with ethnic clichés. But above all, the framework of the death-cell confession (in both the novel and the 1946 film) has been eliminated. With the abrupt conclusion, one wonders whether those unfamiliar with the originals will get Cain's ironic point, let alone make sense of the title, left as they are with a personal deprivation rather than divine—or social—retribution. Or are we too sophisticated for that in the Eighties? Perhaps some of us are too sophisticated for a pseudo-Greek tragedy in terms of kitchen-table humpers. But however you slice it, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* is still good pumpernickel: This time around it's coarser, cruder, and steamier. We peasants happen to like it that way.

Other reworkings are less successful. This time around Ugo Tognazzi and Michel Serrault are simply boring in *La Cage Aux Folles II*, a dreary exploitation of the success—fully justified—of the simple-minded but fresh and funny farce that sentimentalized their homosexual relationship. A dully contrived and clichéd espionage plot sags under Tognazzi's straightman role and is made unbearable by Serrault's squeaks and squeals as he goes through a tedious variety of transvestite turns.

This time around it's Peter Ustinov (and a variety of other good performers in supporting roles) who's left high and dry by a dreary script in *Charlie Chan and the Curse of the Dragon Queen*; why can't the uninspired let classic Hollywood characters sleep the sleep of the dated?

This time around, for the old Mummy's Curse exotic adventure school, there's *Sphinx*, an incoherent yarn about lost tombs, crooked antiques dealers, and a brave, gorgeous, ambitious Egyptologist (Lesley-Ann Down)—but it is, oddly, not boring.

Where's the freshness, the adventure in filmmaking? Ralph Bakshi's *Amer-*

ican Pop, the story of four generations of men involved in show business, has an excitement, an energy, a vitality that are hard to resist and that have been the hallmark of this extraordinary animator's work from the start. Through *Fritz the Cat* and *Heavy Traffic*, with a digression into fantasy with *Wizards* and *Lord of the Rings*, Bakshi, the most creative anti-Disney artist of major stature functioning today, has combined social comment, human perception, and outrageous wit to remarkable effectiveness. With a Ronni Kern script that only momentarily edges toward the softly sentimental and slightly slick, he is concerned with the popular moods music has touched on or reflected in the course of this century. One can quarrel with some specific musical choices or lack thereof, but one cannot question the thrust and point. Bakshi is street-wise and mature, his artistry in full bloom; his characters achieve a humanity rare in animated figures, and his backgrounds continue to grow in depth and complexity. The excitement lies in appreciating the vast reach of his ambition—and realizing that his art is not that far behind. ■

DANCE

Walter Terry

Regional Treasures

There she was, a five-year-old with sausage curls, beaded eyelashes, a scarlet mouth, and a short glitzy costume. She wore toe shoes, and as she staggered onto *pointe* she sang "My lips were made for kisses." This was a fairly typical number in a typical dance school recital of some 40-odd years ago when I began my career as a dance critic. The poor child looked as if she were being trained for bordello life rather than for ballet. But in those distant days there were few national ballet companies of any standing outside of New York City, and the robust National Association for Regional Ballet, with member companies and schools from coast to coast, was yet to be born. Dance junk has not disappeared entirely, but the regional ballet movement has spectacularly elevated standards of instruction and taste.

Recently, in fact, the well-publicized performances of more than a dozen national companies in two special series at the Brooklyn Academy of Music and Brooklyn College have shown New Yorkers that American ballet is greatly diversified. Some elitist balletomanes and critics have been shocked by the healthy, hearty, and often husky vigor of, say, Ballet West from Salt Lake City or the oldest of the country's professional ballet companies, the **San Francisco Ballet**, founded in 1933. Michael Smuin's *Song for Dead Warriors* for the San Francisco Ballet, for example, shocked some sensibilities. It was not a

pretty or even prettily sad picture of the plight of the urban American Indian. Using multimedia, fantastic props, and harsh dance-acting, it came out punching and stabbing. This was ballet, and powerful ballet, but it had nothing whatever to do with Balanchine, Ashton, or the neo-classicists.

The regional ballets that came to Brooklyn, though usually smaller than

and choreographers who have gone on to international success. Every balletomane knows the wonderfully versatile and winsome Rebecca Wright, soloist with the American Ballet Theatre and director of her own ballet ensemble, or the Duell brothers, Daniel and Joseph, valued members of the New York City Ballet; and Donna Wood, one of the major star attractions of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

Dayton's "Miss Jo" also trained Stuart Sebastian who, at a precocious 14, created a full-length ballet for her company. Sebastian went on to become a principal dancer with Washington's now-disbanded National Ballet, partnered such ballerinas as Dame Margot Fonteyn and Violette Verdy, and ultimately quit dancing (at 23) for a career in choreography. As one of the most gifted of America's young (he's just turned 30) choreographers, he has created works for the Pittsburgh Ballet Theater, the Hartford Ballet, the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, Joffrey II, the Metropolitan Opera, and the Munich (Germany) Ballet Days, an international festival where he scored popular and critical triumphs.

Most recently he staged for Dayton a full-length *Sleeping Beauty*, to the Tchaikovsky score, with his own choreography. There were elaborate and yet lightly charming decor and costumes, rather like illustrations for a child's book of fairy tales, by Mimi Maxmen, and choreography, classical



Janus and Morgan of Joffrey II in Gray Veredon's *Unfolding*

the professional companies in personnel and more modest in production, are equally important to the American dance scene. The Atlanta Ballet, founded by Dorothy Alexander, spearheaded the movement in the South in 1956. "Miss Dorothy" remains its patron saint.

In the North, the veteran **Dayton Ballet**, headed by Josephine and Hermene Schwarz, has produced dancers