

Arts & Letters

FILM

[*The Emperor's Club*]

A Classical Education

By Steve Sailer

KEVIN KLINE, WHO stars as a beloved classics teacher in the gentle prep school drama "*The Emperor's Club*," is a near dead-ringer in looks, but not persona, for Errol Flynn, that Golden Age of Hollywood emblem of rampant masculinity.

While playing a fictionalized Flynn in "*My Favorite Year*," Peter O'Toole reacted in horror to the suggestion that he perform live, famously exclaiming, "I'm not an actor, I'm a movie star!" In contrast, the mild-mannered family man Kline has always been too much the actor to ever become quite the movie star that so many had expected.

The leading men of Hollywood tend to be more macho than their counterparts on Broadway. That is partly because fans want deeply masculine heroes, and that is harder to fake in close-ups than when projecting to the second balcony.

Also, emotionally needy theatre folk live for their nightly dose of applause, while male movie idols are a little more like slugger Barry Bonds, who does not care if he is loved so long as he is feared. The Jack Nicholsons and Michael Douglas can get by without daily ovations. They do not mind performing in front of bored gaffers so long as they ultimately get their power, glory, and staggering paychecks.

It was not until after Kline had won two Tony Awards that he made his big screen debut at the age of 35 in "*Sophie's Choice*." (Hard as it is to believe, the boyish actor is now 55.) He's occasionally been hilarious in supporting roles, such as his Oscar showing in "*A Fish Called Wanda*," but as a leading man, he's been less galvanizing.

Kline's natural style is ultra-theatrical. He won a Tony playing the Pirate King in "*Pirates of Penzance*" and another one playing a Flynn-era movie star named Bruce Granit in "*On the Twentieth Century*." Unfortunately, when he gets top billing in a movie, he seems afraid to let his histrionic side rip, so he often turns in a bland effort. Thus, Kline has fallen behind Spacey in the struggle to be Hollywood's top thespian named Kevin.

Here, Kline stars in a worthy little film that cost only one quarter of the typical studio movie's \$50 million budget. While the cinematography and sets are sumptuous, like most low budget movies "*The Emperor's Club*" moves at merely a stately pace through its simple—and slightly clunky—plot (adapted, not surprisingly, from a short story—"The Palace Thief" by Ethan Canin).

Viewers will argue over how fresh "*The Emperor's Club*" is. If you have only seen a few movies about caring teachers opening the minds of their students, this will seem like all the others. If you have seen them all, however, you will notice some intriguing differences.

For example, the high school boys actually look like fourteen-year-olds, not actors who had been tending bar on Cahuenga Blvd. until they got their big breaks. It helps that Kline is 6'-2" and headmaster Edward Herrmann, playing another of his bespectacled uber-WASP roles, is 6'-5".

Further, Kline does not play an English teacher. Teacher flicks are normally about English class, as in "*Dead Poets Society*," because screenwriters loved English. (I am still waiting for a movie about the great trigonometry teacher who instills a lifelong love of cosines.)

Kline teaches Greek and Roman civilization, which is not the trendiest of subjects. When asked by a job interviewer what his studies had prepared him to do, a classics major supposedly once answered, "It trains you to be a Roman emperor."

Kline's real calling, however, is transforming the callow lads of the Class of 1976 into young men with characters staunch enough to lead America in war and peace. The plot centers on his struggle to get a U.S. senator's hell-raising son to buckle down and qualify for the school's annual "Mr. Julius Caesar" Roman trivia contest.

In "*Dead Poets Society*," Robin Williams taught the preppies to rebel against stifling conformity through the soul-uplifting challenge of literature and so forth and so on. "*The Emperor's Club*" sets itself the harder task of showing a good but outdated man trying to teach the cool kid the value of duty, discipline, and honor—and finding it not quite the rewarding experience he had expected.

Of course, a middle-aged bachelor who takes such a profound interest in a youth is a little worrisome, especially after Kline played an English and drama teacher coming out of the closet in "*In & Out*."

Still, even though the old East Coast prep schools were modeled on the famous English boarding schools that were excessively devoted to aping the ways of the unseemly Ancient Greeks, those kind of "*Brideshead Revisited*" goings-on were always much less com-

mon in their American equivalents. And if that is not enough, the story's adapter reassuringly provides Kline with a pretty but married French teacher to adore from afar. ■

Rated a mild PG-13 for language and the rebel's collection of *Oui* magazines.

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BOOKS

[*Revolt from the Heartland: The Struggle for an Authentic Conservatism*, Joseph Scotchie, Transaction Publishers, 135 pages]

The Paleo Persuasion

By Samuel Francis

JOSEPH SCOTCHIE'S *Revolt from the Heartland* is not, as some readers might guess from the title, about the terrorism of right-wing militias in the Midwestern United States, although some readers might also say that guess was close enough. In fact, *Revolt from the Heartland* deals with the emergence of "paleoconservatism," a species of conservative thought that despite its name ("paleo" is a Greek prefix meaning "old") is a fairly recent twist in the cunningly knotted mind of the American Right. While paleos sometimes like to characterize their beliefs as merely the continuation of the conservative thought of the 1950s and '60s, and while in fact many of them do have their personal and intellectual roots in the conservatism of that era, the truth is that what is now called paleoconservatism is at least as new as the neoconservatism at which many paleos like to sniff as a newcomer.

Paleoconservatism is largely the invention of a single magazine, the Rockford Institute's *Chronicles*, as it has

been edited since the mid-1980s by Thomas Fleming, and Scotchie's book is essentially an account of what Fleming and his major colleagues at *Chronicles* mainly, historian Paul Gottfried, book review editor Chilton Williamson Jr., professor Clyde Wilson, and I believe, and what the differences are between our brand of conservatism and others.

Scotchie's first three chapters are a survey of the history of American conservatism up until the advent of *Chronicles*, including an account of the "Old Right" of the pre-World-War-II, pre-Depression eras (for once, an account not confined to the libertarian "isolationists" but encompassing also the Southern Agrarians), as well as the emergence of the "Cold War conservatism" of *National Review* and the neoconservatism of the Reagan era and after. Scotchie's overview of these different shades of the Right is useful in itself and necessary to clarify the differences between these colorations and the paleos who constitute his main subject, though he may underestimate the differentiation between the current, paleo "Old Right" and earlier "Old Rights."

Although Scotchie does not put it quite this way, contemporary paleoconservatism developed as a reaction against three trends in the American Right during the Reagan administration. First, it reacted against the bid for dominance by the neoconservatives, former liberals who insisted not only that their version of conservative ideology and rhetoric prevail over those of older conservatives, but also that their team should get the rewards of office and patronage and that the other team of the older Right receive virtually nothing.

The politics of this conflict, as those involved in it will recall, was often vicious and personal, the most notorious case being the backstabbing treatment of the late M.E. Bradford by his neoconservative rivals over the appointment to the chairmanship of the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1981. The bitterness of the NEH contro-

versy was due not to the neocons pushing their own nominee, the totally unknown and laughably under-qualified William Bennett but to their complete lack of hesitation in smearing, lying about, and undermining Bradford at every opportunity.

Scotchie deals briefly with the Bradford controversy, but I have to say, as one closely involved in supporting Bradford at the time, that he does not dwell sufficiently on the sheer evil and meanness of neoconservative conduct in it. But he also notes the firing, calculated vilification, or effective ostracism of several paleos or paleo fellow travelers by the neocon cabal in the following years as well as the deliberate campaign to strip the Rockford Institute of funding by neoconservative-controlled foundations.

As the neoconservatives emerged into prominence, most paleos more or less welcomed them, believing their contributions were largely positive and that if they could move no further to the right then, they might do so in time. Certainly that was Mel Bradford's view before he enjoyed the benefit of their malicious attentions. By the late 1980s, however, no informed paleo harbored any such illusions any longer. Critics of paleoconservatives who raise an eyebrow at the bitterness and sheer hatred that paleo polemics with neocons sometimes display will find in Scotchie's book a good deal of explanation for such passions.

The second reaction that elicited the emergence of paleoconservatism was what most paleos began to grasp as the intellectual, moral, and political collapse of the mainstream conservative movement itself. Not only did such stalwarts of the mainstream Right as *National Review* and various Washington think tanks begin to welcome neoconservatives as allies and allow them to displace older conservatives, but the older conservatives themselves (as well as the much vaunted "New Right") began to adopt the essentially liberal rhetoric and values to which neoconservatives appealed.