

Innocents at Home

I just returned to my home in Mexico after two weeks of hard touring in Bolivia. It was the kind of travel that at my advanced age I should know better than but never

do: flying into grass strips to boat into the endless swamps of the pampas, freezing in unheated shacks in the wild high desert at 12,000 feet, mountain biking down El Camino de la Muerte out of La Paz next to drop-offs of half a mile. Not sensible, perhaps, but few things worth doing are.

Curiously, in South America, our backyard, my traveling-companions-by-chance were virtually never American. There were Brits, Aussies, Kiwis, yes. And German, French, and Dutch folk, but no gringos. They weren't hippies. They ran from 22 to 40: an Irish girl of maybe 26 who had been solo on the road for six months, a Frenchwoman in the wine business in her late 30's on a two-week jaunt, an English financial officer on holiday. Most carried expedition backpacks. They were friendly, gutsy, self-reliant. I liked them.

But there were no Americans.

It is a pattern. Another pattern is that almost all of the Europeans know at least two languages, the English-speaking peoples only one. It isn't just in Bolivia. I live in a region of Mexico (near Guadalajara) that has a large population of American expatriates and retirees. They almost never learn Spanish and do not much mix with the Mexicans. When I covered the American military in Europe years back, the troops never learned German. Some refused to leave the base.

I knew my companions in Bolivia briefly but well. When you spend nights at 20-below in unheated shacks with the wind howling outside, eight in a room in

sleeping bags, an intimacy grows. One crazy night in the swamps, we ran out of beer and the guides took us in boats through the night to a remote bar on stilts where we drank ourselves silly. It was a splendid evening.

But there were no gringos.

The Europeans bicker among themselves a bit. ("What can you expect of a German?" they will ask, or "Everybody knows the Dutch are stingy," but they say it with a smile.) Yet they all know each other's countries. They have been to Morocco, India, Egypt. They have a worldliness about them. It is not an air of snotty superiority. They are simply comfortable abroad.

HOW MANY OF THESE PEOPLE HAVE SPOKEN TO AN IRAQI?

They think Americans are idiots. By and large they aren't offensive and don't (usually) bring the subject up. I am not inclined to defend the indefensible, however, and so discussions emerged. Why, they want to know, do Americans know nothing about the world? I never quite know what to say. Well, er, it's a big country, we don't have to speak other languages, ah, the schools are terrible (why, they ask?), we just aren't very curious or adventurous (why not, they ask?). The observable fact is that Americans display a blank, uninquiring ignorance of other cultures. Our current president is a prime example.

What effect does this have on our foreign policy? On our relations with the rest of the earth? A lot, I think.

I remember that the White House believed that the Iraqis would welcome our invasion by strewing flowers in our path, such would be their delight with American values, etc. It slackens the jaw. Does no one in the hermetic bubble on Pennsylvania Avenue understand that other peoples have their ways of doing things? That not everybody wants to be American? Two weeks of backpacking around Marrakech and Cairo would disabuse them—but who in the White House has done it?

The American attitude implied in policy, and expressed in the bow-wowish patriotism of much of my e-mail, is that most other countries are backward, if not actually aboriginal, and in need of enlightenment—perhaps armed enlightenment. I find myself asking: how many of these people have spoken to an Iraqi? To any Muslim? Been to Iraq? Been any-

where? Know what countries border Iraq? Have a passport? Know why 622 may have been a year of some relevance?

If I mention that the rest of the world doesn't like the United States, the response usually is, "I'd rather be respected than loved." But the U.S. is not respected. It is feared, like a muscular drunk who comes into a bar looking for a fight. If George and Condoleezza and Rumsnamara had spent a year on a shoestring on the banks of the Mekong in Vientiane and in Rabat and Managua and Lyon and Istanbul and Managua, we might not be the insular, puzzled country that we are today. And we might not be surprised, over and over, to find that people about whom we know nothing do not behave as we expect. ■

Arts & Letters

FILM

[*The Terminal*]

Lost in Transit

By Steve Sailer

In *How to Lose Friends and Alienate People*, Toby Young's lightly fictionalized memoir of flopping as a celebrity journalist in New York, his humiliations are artfully aggravated by simultaneous spots of preposterous luck enjoyed by his real-life friend Sacha Gervasi, a fellow Fleet Street hack who ventured to Hollywood instead. When Young gets fired from *Vanity Fair*, for example, Gervasi sells a knock-off of "The Full Monty" for a half million.

When I idly checked the invaluable Internet Movie Database last year, however, Gervasi's run of good fortune looked defunct. His new screenplay was a claustrophobic-sounding fable about an Eastern European traveler stuck permanently in an airline terminal: "Waiting for Godot" meets "No Exit," with a dollop of *The Trial* for added moroseness. I couldn't help thinking of "The Simpsons" episode where Krusty the Clown—having lost the rights to feature "Itchy & Scratchy" cartoons—desperately substitutes Communist Czechoslovakia's favorite animated existentialists, "Worker and Parasite."

I gleefully scanned down to see which minor-leaguers had blundered into putting Gervasi's career-killing concept on screen: Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks.

I should have guessed that the only people who would think a script about hanging out at "The Terminal" for nine months sounded like fun would be

superstars so rich that their only recent experience with airports is the five feet of tarmac between the limo and the Gulfstream.

"The Terminal" is certainly more heart-warming than its tagline "Life is waiting" forebodes, but it's forgettable compared to Spielberg and Hanks's last lightweight collaboration, "Catch Me If You Can," not to mention their heavy-weight landmark, "Saving Private Ryan." It's still an above-average movie, but the opportunity cost—the terrific film Spielberg and Hanks could have made together if they weren't piddling their time away on "The Terminal"—is painful to contemplate.

While "The Terminal" aspires to "Groundhog Day's" ultimately uplifting portrayal of a seemingly soul-deadening location, the script lacks that minor classic's extravagant invention and nasty Capraesque wit. Even the man-eating Catherine Zeta-Jones is reduced to a puddle of niceness.

While Hanks's long hot streak at picking good scripts is kaput, his sensible career transition from leading man to character lead is back on track after his iffy con man in "The Ladykillers." He plays Viktor Navorski, a good-hearted Slav (perhaps the cousin of Andy Kaufman's Latka from "Taxi") who disembarks at JFK on the last flight from Krakozhia. A half-completed coup back home plunges the punctilious Homeland Security administrator (Stanley Tucci) into uncertainty over the validity of Viktor's passport, so he temporizes by telling Viktor he must linger indefinitely in the international transit concourse. Being that rare individual, foreign or American, who does not treat our immigration laws with contempt, Viktor dutifully stays put.

Gervasi's premise is neither sensi-

ble—airports have enough trouble keeping domestic homeless people from infesting terminals without the government relegating random foreigners to a life of scavenging saltine crackers at the food court just because yet another coup has occurred—nor satirical. In an age in which a 94-year-old ex-Marine general gets the third degree when his Medal of Honor sets off the metal detector (because we wouldn't want to profile passengers ethnically, now would we?), airport security is ripe for a brutal lamppooning, but "The Terminal" doesn't even try.

Hanks is excellent, although much of the appeal of his performance is that you say to yourself, "Hey, that guy up there with the Ukrainian accent and beaten-down Warsaw Bloc body language is Mr. All-American Regular Joe." If, instead, Belarus's best actor gave an identical performance, it just wouldn't be the same.

This kind of acting-for-the-sake-of-acting, however, would be more effective on stage, as would a plot limited to one overlit building. While watching the master director's camera swirl extravagantly from one floor to another in the packed concourse, I started to wonder whether Spielberg was filming on location or, as it turned out, had built an entire terminal from scratch. His vast set would be awe-inspiring in a theatre, but the how'd-they-do-that questions it raises on screen just interfere with the unconscious suspension of disbelief that's key to enjoying the more realistic medium of film.

If Gervasi wants to milk his dopey little idea further, he should find a composer and choreographer to turn it into a hit Broadway musical. Toby Young would be apoplectic. ■

Rated a mild PG-13 for some bad language.