

The Candidates' Vices

GIVEN THAT ONLY TWO sitting senators have gone straight to the White House, and both died within three years of taking office, the choice of running mates in this election was unusually important. The results revealed Senator Obama to be as cool and cerebral as Senator McCain is impetuous and visceral and expressed the candidates' flaws as much as their leadership styles. In choosing an establishment figure in Joe Biden, Obama bowed to conventional wisdom and Beltway expectations. McCain, by contrast, stayed true to his habit of impulsive decisions in selecting Sarah Palin, opting at the last minute against Joe Lieberman, his reported favorite.

Contrary to the common portrayal of Palin as the "maverick" pick, the decision is no measure of McCain's break with the Bush administration or the party's corrupt elements. McCain's choice, besides being a concession to political necessity and a sop to disaffected conservatives, has all the marks of Mr. Bush's flawed decision-making: poorly informed, driven by gut reactions, and heedless of consequences. Substantively, McCain and Palin have not repudiated the Bush record. The 2008 ticket resembles nothing so much as another Bush/Cheney ticket in reverse order.

McCain's pick was transparently aimed at shoring up conservatives and poaching disgruntled Clinton voters yet was presented as proof of his reform credentials. But like McCain's own dubious reforms, which include trampling on the First Amendment and pushing for effective immigration amnesty, Palin's record does not bear much scrutiny. Between her support for windfall-profits taxes and acceptance of earmark spending, she is an odd choice to crusade against tax hikes and federal pork.

What is most striking about the Palin selection is the electoral strategy that it represents. Despite having already solidified Republicans behind himself much more than Obama has done with his partisans, McCain was suffering from an enthusiasm gap, which he has now done much to close. Even so, as fewer voters identified themselves as Republicans this year, there was little incentive to generate greater excitement among a dwindling base and more reason to pursue those alienated by the Bush administration. Choosing Palin would have made more sense in previous elections when the GOP's reputation was still reasonably intact, but today it seems an invitation to electoral disaster.

The selections of Biden and Palin show how much the major parties have switched roles in this election. The Democrats have fielded a ticket designed to make a coherent foreign-policy and national-security argument, and they have done so without the flag-waving metooism of Kerry. For their part, the Republicans, a party now defined by its foreign-policy blunder in Iraq, have opted to run almost obsessively on domestic oil drilling and selected their vice-presidential nominee accordingly.

Obama, consistent with his aversion to confronting established interests, selected Biden to acknowledge his lack of credentials in foreign policy and demonstrate his fealty to the Washington consensus on America's role in the world. While McCain may have used more bellicose rhetoric over the war in Georgia, both Biden and Obama have made clear that their views on NATO expansion and relations with Russia are similar to McCain's, and it was Biden's visit to Tbilisi as Foreign Relations Committee chair that clinched the spot for

him. As a supporter of the wars against Yugoslavia and Iraq, Biden represents the antithesis of what many antiwar progressives thought they were going to find in an Obama administration.

Offshore drilling has become virtually the only winning economic issue for Republicans. Party regulars descended into self-parody during the convention when they took up a modified version of a Black Panther slogan, "Drill, baby, drill." It is fitting, then, that the VP nominee is governor of our largest petrostate and that her main, perhaps only, area of policy expertise is energy. No doubt the national GOP hopes to use Palin and drilling to ride popular discontent with high gas prices to victory. This would help account for the paucity of other economic policy ideas on offer in St. Paul. Regardless, it is a political strategy based on the chimera of energy independence and demagoguery against foreign oil producers to advance a meddlesome foreign-policy agenda.

It was difficult to watch the Republican convention and not have a feeling of *déjà vu* over Palin's rapturous reception. Just as George W. Bush was acclaimed as "one of us" by many conservatives who had been scared into his arms by John McCain in the 2000 primaries, Palin has received the same enthusiastic endorsement on a symbolic, identity-driven basis, despite being chosen by the same man the Right once found so repugnant. After eight years of seeing the last "reformer with results" in action, most conservatives appear to have learned nothing about how the GOP manipulates them and wins their votes. If McCain prevails, they will get more of the same policies that have brought Republicans to their current predicament. ■

Arts & Letters

FILM

[The Women]

I Prefer the Older Women

By Steve Sailer

ISN'T IT IRRITATING when a know-it-all movie critic trashes a new release just because it's not as good as its classic source, whether that be an older film, book, play, TV show, or theme-park ride? That's a tiresome routine because it's mathematically certain that most new movies will be comparatively worse than the material on which they are based. The average new movie is inevitably average in quality, while the famous old works that Hollywood spends tens of millions adapting into new flicks were almost all above average.

On the other hand, the differences between the source and the new release offer useful clues to the filmmakers' point of view, and can illustrate the evolution of attitudes over the decades.

Therefore, my rule as a reviewer is to watch the new film first to see what my unbiased reaction is, then read the book or watch the old DVD.

The new version of "The Women" illustrates the value of this approach. It had been a couple of decades since I'd seen George Cukor's 1939 version of the satirical play by Clare Booth Luce (the future *grande dame* of the American Right) about Park Avenue ladies who

lunch. So I found the new film—a chick-flick-buddy comedy about Mary (Meg Ryan) and Sylvia (Annette Bening), the squabbling best friends forever who team up again to win Mary's husband back from the scheming perfume counter vixen Crystal (Eva Mendes)—to be quite likable.

Compared to last summer's hit, "Sex and the City," "The Women" is shorter, somewhat funnier, less tawdry, and Ryan is easier on the eyes than Sarah Jessica Parker. Some of the stars appear too Botoxed to manage understated facial expressions, but we don't live in an age of subtlety, so little is lost.

But then I watched the original from Hollywood's *annus mirabilis* of 1939, and it makes the 2008 effort seem like *The Importance of Being Earnest* rewritten to serve as a very special episode of "The Oprah Winfrey Show."

Norma Shearer, the stubby, cross-eyed Canadian whose indomitable determination made her Queen of MGM, brought her refinement and silent movie-acting skills to the role of Mary, the betrayed upper-class wife bravely trying to keep up the façade while crumbling inside. Shearer's real-life rival, Joan Crawford, who now seems too much the screen legend to be believable in most of her roles, was perfectly cast as the phony gold-digger Crystal. When playing herself—an ambitious broad on the make trying to act the lovely lady—she's awfully appealing.

And, in her first comic role, the great comedienne Rosalind Russell ("His Girl Friday" and "Auntie Mame") prefigured the "I Love Lucy" TV series by a decade with the slapstick willfulness of her Sylvia. In contrast to Bening's sympa-

thetic 2008 portrayal of Sylvia as a high-minded fashion magazine editor whose publisher wants her to run sleazy cover stories on "How to Get Revenge," Russell's Sylvia was a spoiled stinker in Jungle Red nail polish who spreads poisonous gossip about Mary's marital troubles out of malicious glee.

The remake was intentionally declawed by its writer-director Diane English, creator of "Murphy Brown," out of feminist loyalty to the team. English complained, "the movie had very old-fashioned ideas that were in great need of updating. ... The original play and film were written as a poison pen letter to shallow society women who would stab each other in the back over a man. ... I had to figure out a way to shift the focus. I wanted to celebrate women..."

Self-esteem boosting female empowerment plot developments ahoy! (Aren't there any bitchy gay men left in Hollywood who could have done for the remake what Cukor did in 1939?)

Another question the new version raises is whether a classic comedy of manners can be adapted to an era that disdains manners as pretentious and undemocratic? The upper class just isn't as entertaining as it used to be. After the 1960s social revolution, the rich kept most of their privileges (such as being rich), but shed their traditional responsibility of edifying the masses with their starchy manners and dress. The current cult of authenticity allows the upper crust to live more casual, comfortable lives—no more dressing for dinner—but, as the new "Women" demonstrates, less amusing ones, too. ■

Rated PG-13 for sex-related material, language, and some drug use.