

what happens. Stavisky, at his most fundamental, was a failed existentialist. He recognized no moral imperatives in his dealings with others. He thought that since there was no heavenly or worldly force preventing him from cheating and stealing, that he might as well cheat and steal as not.

When other people cheat him and betray him, though, Stavisky is shocked and outraged. He should have known better.

The director, Alain Resnais, is one of the few authentic geniuses operating in the world of film, and he plumbs deep into our fears of existence and tells us how we should not react. He shows us that people whom we might have considered successful do not really know how to cope.

Running parallel with the story of Stavisky's last months is a story of the arrival of the exiled Trotsky in France. Its meaning is rather obscure, but is probably that Trotsky did know how to cope. When confronted with the failure of a truly grand and enormous project (in a physical and not a moral sense), namely the Russian Revolution, Trotsky withdrew and continued to fight for what he wanted, without being surprised at anything. Stavisky, the sharpie and con man, was an idealist about other people, while Trotsky, the idealist and revolutionary, was a realist about what life held.

The movie is shot beautifully and every frame is a joy to behold. Jean-Paul Bel-

mondo is a wonderfully mobile and sympathetic Stavisky. The movie is that rare breed—intensely interesting and entertaining, and thoroughly instructive.

A further reason to see *Stavisky* is that Stavisky's wife, Arlette, is beautiful beyond words.

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Mel Brooks, a writer and comedian of great ability, has always had difficulty in keeping his directorial efforts from simply falling apart. *The Producers* had a funny idea, but it became a collection of more and more in-joke gags which finally ended without much point. *Blazing Saddles* had the same problem. It really was not a whole movie. Rather it was a collection of jokes which were sometimes individually funny, but did not hold together. At the end, it was almost incredibly sophomoric.

Now Brooks has made *Young Frankenstein*. It hangs together; it works; it is a scream.

Based on the *Son of Frankenstein* story, Brooks' movie stars Gene Wilder as an American teaching physician who is a grandson of the Baron Frankenstein. Wilder inherits his grandfather's castle in Transylvania and is impelled into working to bring the dead back to life. Like Brooks' earlier movies, *Young Frankenstein* is full of jokes. But its main character has a certain kindly lunatic quality

about him that makes the story whole. It is not a nightclub act; it is a funny fictional snatch of biography.

There are hilarious supporting characters such as the hunchbacked Igor, played by Marty Feldman, whose hump keeps changing sides. There is Cloris Leachman as the incredibly severe housekeeper. Frau Blucher, whose very name makes the horses shiver. Madeline Kahn makes a wonderful Jewish princess who tries to keep the monster from raping her but who then, because of his monstrous proportions, falls in love with him.

Young Frankenstein is not the definitive spoof of the horror film genre, but it is a very good one.

It is extremely interesting to notice how similar the humor of *Young Frankenstein* is to that of television shows. The staple of television humor is the deflation of an attitude. For instance, Dr. Frankenstein thinks his experiment has failed. He says calmly that scientists sometimes fail. He says he will be stoic. Then he pauses a moment and goes into a frenzy. Or when Igor has stolen the wrong kind of brain, Dr. Frankenstein says he will not be mad at him but then starts to strangle him. It is television humor at its most evanescent, yet it works.

Young Frankenstein is an imperfect film and no work of lasting greatness, but it is funny while you watch it, and even, in contrast with Brooks' other movies, for a few hours afterwards. □

Book Review/David Brudnoy

The Little Engine That Could

Professor Rothbard is a little engine that could. He is young (as philosopher giants go), brilliant, tireless, generous, and open. He has a couple of great works under his belt—*Man, Economy and State* and *For a New Liberty*—as well as numerous other seminal books and countless provocative articles. His multi-volume history of these United States is up-coming; you can bet your bottom funny-money that a Rothbard history isn't going to sound like warmed over Blum-Catton-Woodward-Schlesinger and Co. For all his tendencies to radical a-priorism now and again, Murray Rothbard represents the best of today's libertarianism, and exemplifies a quality rare among libertarians, who, next to Stalinists, are generally the most humorless of men: a keen wit. It helps when you're a libertarian in 1984 minus nine.

What a nuisance he is, too. He won't stay pigeonholed as academic high priest of his anarcho-capitalist subcult of the dismal science. He ranges wide, and insists on pushing things back to first causes, examining problems constantly in

terms of principles with scarcely a graceful bow to practicalities and suchlike impedimenta; what a nuisance is this guy who—politely, sure—offers at best an *up yours* to those who would contain him within their limited purview.

Egalitarianism as a Revolt against Nature And Other Essays

by Murray N. Rothbard
Libertarian Review Press \$2.50 (pb)

There is a striking quality to this collection of Rothbard's recent essays, which may have for others an effect of shaking up previous beliefs like that a collection of la Rand's essays had upon this reviewer long ago. Someone fed up to here with statist jargon and altruist preachments, coming upon *Egalitarianism*, might recognize it as a welcome assault on the reader's present view of the world, and dash on from there into the rich vein of libertarian and conser-

vative writings available to those who will push beyond their school reading list and locate the stuff.

Murray Rothbard wants no truck with contemporary glibness. In the title essay (from *Modern Age*, 1973), he offers what may well be the neatest libertarian critique available, without technical and obfuscatory jargon, on the doctrine of equality. He doesn't merely sputter sputtering comes easy to rightists these days. He doesn't give away the battle by conceding, as many do, that the Left is right in theory, just impractical. "Egalitarians do *not* have ethics on their side unless one can maintain that the destruction of civilization, and even of the human race itself, may be crowned with the laurel wreath of a high and laudable morality." It is a smashing piece, as are several others herein.

"Left and Right: The Prospects for Liberty" (from *Left and Right*, 1965) is disquieting. Whatever its guise, he attacks statism, of which he finds a surfeit on the Right as on the Left. "Socialism, like liberalism and against

conservatism, accepted the industrial system and the liberal *goals* of freedom, reason, mobility, progress, higher living standards for the masses, and an end to theocracy and war; but it tried to achieve these ends by the use of incompatible conservative means: statism, central planning, communitarianism, etc." It should be obvious where that sort of reasoning leads when he turns his gaze on conservatives. He seeks no detente with the traditionalist Right, and for those who so categorize themselves, this essay will hurt.

If the major ideological enemy is authoritarianism, the major enemy agency (as eviscerated in "The Anatomy of the State," from *Rampart Journal*, 1965) is: the State—coercive, parasitic, voracious, seemingly uncheckable, at least thus far, at least, he would have us believe, until libertarianism reigns. But why libertarianism? Are we to suppose that, of all manner of men, the libertarian alone is not subject to the lures of power, is not prone to the perversions of force? Is he so unlike bushy-tailed radicals,

leaking-aorta liberals, and God-Country-Motherhood conservatives, that he is not wont to fanaticism when the moon is full and the conditions are appropriate? Well, Dr. Rothbard insists, a libertarian must exemplify a "lifelong dedication to liberty" which "can only be grounded on a passion for justice"—a radical temperament, an abolitionist one in fact, to "abolish instantaneously all invasions of liberty"; "powered by justice, he cannot be moved by amoral utilitarian pleas that justice not come about until the criminals are 'compensated.'" So there we have it. But I wonder. Goodness knows, we're in lousy shape now, what with collectivism racing (no longer creeping) to overtake us all. But might not even these passionate abolitionists wreak havoc, "powered by justice"? One hopes not, but zealotry is off-putting, and I reach for the Bufferin after reading manifestoes, libertarian or otherwise, by nutteries as well as by my sweet friend Murray.

But what fun he is! What a delight to watch Rothbard start by saying A, march

to B, then gallop on to X, Y, Z: on war, peace, and the state; on the fallacy of the public sector; on anarcho-communism; on much more besides. And what saucy stuff is an essay like "Kid Lib" (from *Outlook*, 1972), brutal but sound as a tight drum on the "rights" of kids, the "duties" of parents, and a civilized interplay of the two, albeit Pandoran in opening up more questions than finishing them off. But he is too harsh in "The Great Women's Liberation Issue" (*Individualist*, 1970): he demolishes Chick Lib insanity, fine; but he simply does not comprehend (and seems silly when pooh-poohing) the sounder insights of that movement; indeed, he has no real understanding of the prevalence of sexism in this society. On these matters he resembles more his enemy the traditionalist conservative than the beacon of freedom he would wish to be considered.

But then, who's perfect when he's furious? Murray Rothbard evokes in me the image of Garrison, whom he quotes: "I have need to be all on fire, for I have mountains of ice about me to melt." □

Theatre Review/Max Geltman

An Evening with Mencken

Over in a corner of old Greenwich Village in New York City, Paul Shyre is holding forth as H. L. Mencken at the tiny Cherry Lane Theatre in an adaptation of some of the Baltimore Sage's most ebullient epigrams and aphorisms which he has aptly titled *Blasts and Bravos*. The audiences—happily the youngest of audiences—are chuckling with unalloyed mirth, a kind of joy that hasn't been heard in the land since the untimely departure of the founder of the original Saturday Night Club. Men like Mencken always die too soon.

But now—for a while at least—he comes to life in his study (exquisitely recreated by Eldon Elder) at 1524 Hollins Street, Baltimore. Here in fireman-red suspenders, with a bottle of good cheap wine on one table, and a stein full of Michelob (he didn't always guzzle Wurzburger) on his writing desk, Mencken-Shyre talks casually, wittily, stalking among his bookshelves in house slippers, culling bits and pieces from his *Schimpf-lexicon* (barbs cast in his direction by the High Booboisie) and from newspaper clips, very much in the spirit of this *Alternative's* "Current Wisdom." Best of all, one smiles inwardly not merely at the high humor of the man, but at his reverential love of life and manners (or lack of them) as expressed by the most canting of his pet hates—the American politician.

Not that Mencken hated politics. He was, in the best sense of the term, a po-

litical animal. A Tory in politics (though this recreation of the Master is perhaps niggardly on this point), he deplored the low caliber of men chosen for the highest offices in the Republic. "Going into politics," he once said, "is as fatal to a gentleman as going into a bordello is to a virgin." Also he detested "democracy"

*Blasts and Bravos:
An Evening with H.L. Mencken*

adapted by Paul Shyre
Cherry Lane Theatre, New York

in the ignoble sense which sees in absolute egalitarianism an improvement on the human spectacle. In fact, he despised all "uplift," political and religious, most of all that kind of uplift practiced by the YMCA that combines muscle-building with soul-soaring.

Mencken was an unabashed agnostic, but not quite an atheist. When the Seventh Day Adventists predicted the end of the world, he took the precaution of removing the works of Voltaire from his shelves and the portrait of Darwin from his studio wall!

Once in Hollywood he let himself be converted by Aimee Semple McPherson. To set his friends' minds at rest he sent

off the following telegram to Philip Goodman: "was baptized by Aimee last Tuesday night you can have no idea of the peace it has brought my soul I can now eat five bismarck herrings without the slightest acidoses."

The orthodox may say that Henry lacked the gift of faith. But he had faith in man—so long as he stayed out of Hollywood, the national suburb which he called "the great reductio ad absurdum of civilization."

These things, quoted out of context, make one chuckle, as indeed they were intended to do. He observed of Coolidge, "Speaking or silent he says absolutely nothing. There's nothing to be said against him, but then there's nothing to be said for him—except that he slept more soundly than any other President. Nero fiddled but Coolidge snored." (These quotations from Shyre's production and lots more can be found in Sara Mayfield's *The Constant Circle*, a book I heartily recommend.) Yet he liked Silent Cal, reserving his undiluted contempt for William Jennings Bryan, who denied to the heavens that he was a mammal, as the Sage told his musical colleagues at the Saturday Night Club.

Mencken was not (in my judgment) as sound in his musical appreciations as he has been made out to be. It was his notion that there were only two kinds of music: "German and bad." Beethoven stood on