



THE TALKIES

MAZURSKY TRIO

by John Podhoretz

In Paul Mazursky's *Willie and Phil*, the title characters love each other, though they are not homosexuals, and they both love Jeannette, who loves them both. Since she is not a homosexual either, she has affairs with each of them, first with Willie, whom she marries when she is eight months pregnant with his child, and then with Phil after Willie goes to India to find himself. When Willie returns, he and Phil both sleep on the floor, not able to decide which one should go to Jeannette. Finally she leaves them, and, we are told at the end, the two men go on to lead very ordinary lives.

This is the plot of *Willie and Phil*. It is not surprising that Mazursky, who wrote and directed, should make a movie with such a weak story; his good films (with the exception of his wonderful, autobiographical *Next Stop Greenwich Village*) have no story to speak of. *Bob and Carol* and *Ted and Alice* is a series of revue sketches about life in California, and *Blume in Love* is a rambling tale of the passion the title character felt for his ex-wife. But what is surprising about *Willie and Phil* is how thin and lifeless it is. It is the work of a man who has lost the comic spark that was his only real gift.

In the late sixties and early seventies, as Hollywood was leaping onto the "New Consciousness" bandwagon, Mazursky was making good-natured but deadly accurate fun of the attitudes and moods of the day. In *I Love You, Alice B. Toklas*, which he wrote but did not direct, a square Jewish lawyer takes one bite of a marijuana-spiked brownie and soon thereafter becomes a hippie. In *Bob and Carol* and *Ted and Alice*, a woman who has just had her consciousness "raised" follows a waiter into a restaurant kitchen, attempting to prove to him how much she "loves" him. In *Blume in Love*, Stephen Blume and his wife, who meet at a rally for the United Farm Workers, go through yoga and health

food together before she kicks him out for sleeping with his black secretary, and Blume becomes friends with his ex-wife's new lover, with whom he smokes dope and laughs a great deal. Mazursky, with satire as his stock in trade, got underneath the skins of his characters, showed what made them tick, and portrayed their lives, their homes, and even their analysts with such precision that it wasn't necessary to parade them around in a coherent story. They seemed so real that their lives needed no drama, no structure, through which we could better understand them.

But in *Willie and Phil*, even more than in his last movie, *An Unmarried Woman*, everything is awry. No longer do the people seem real, no longer do their lives make sense, and no longer can the absence of a story seem tolerable. Mazursky's characters have increasingly become emblematic figures in his own ideological journey. Mazursky wishes to put the seventies on film, but instead he has made a movie about three vapid people, two of whom he characterizes only in a joke: Willie, a Jewish

schoolteacher, wants to be a concert jazz pianist, and Phil, an Italian photographer, wants to be a Jewish intellectual. Having said this by means of a narrator, Mazursky does not even feel compelled to make their actions fit the joke. And as for Jeannette—well, she is so mysterious, so elusive, so breathtakingly Mother Earthish, so much, in fact, the perfect woman of feminist fantasy, that Mazursky doesn't even bother to make her comprehensible in a joke. She wants nothing—she simply is.

Phil is Italian, and so he says "aay" very often, acts as though he is always suffering from a dyspeptic ulcer, and cries and laughs and talks very loud. Willie is Jewish, and so he is thin and sensitive, good-looking with a big nose and a slight Brooklyn accent, teaches *Hamlet* in a high school in the South Bronx, finds that, as a Jew, it is difficult for him to buy a German car, and is in general quite dreadfully earnest. These two, hackneyed and cliché-ridden as they are, are more believable than Jeannette, who appears in Greenwich Village from Kentucky, is beautiful, doesn't curse, and is forever saying things like, "Don't tell me that you love me,

just love me," and declares, "I never made any promises," to her husband. She flips a coin to choose between the two men, Willie wins, and she moves in with him in what is supposed to be a platonic relationship but which, after five minutes in Willie's impossibly huge and glamorous Greenwich Village apartment, develops into a beautifully sexual one. She tells Phil, who loves her, not to love her, but as soon as Willie is gone she jumps into the sack with him as well, sleeps with neither of them upon Willie's return, and then, suddenly, takes off. We last see her in the arms of Igor, a Russian dancer.

While almost everything in the movie is wrong—from the ridiculous elegance of Willie's parents' home in Brooklyn, to the almost suburban farmhouse in rural Kentucky that Jeannette's father, a penniless traveling salesman, somehow left to Jeannette's mother, and from the *oy vey*s of the newly Buddhist Willie to the *goombahs* of the hopefully Jewish Phil—nothing is more inaccurate and confused than Jeannette's character. Everything about her, what she says about her freedom, her lack of commitment, her wish to make no promises, and her attitude of superiority to these men, suggests that she has taken a crash course in the works of the Women's Liberation movement. But never do we see a copy of *The Feminine Mystique* or *The Second Sex* on her night table, nor do we ever see her with any other women besides her sister, her mother, and Willie's and Phil's mothers. She seems to have come into this world a full-blown feminist free-spirit, naming her child Zelda and having absolute domain over her own and her lovers' actions. This girl from Kentucky has never had her consciousness raised, yet she could pose for the cover of *Ms.* at any point in the movie. She is, to date, the falsest screen portrait of the liberated woman.

Mazursky intends the movie to be a chronicle of the 1970s, as seen through three paradigmatic lives, but



John Podhoretz's short story, "The Piano Recital," appeared recently in Harper's.

all Willie, Phil, and Jeannette ever do is drop acid once (in the only scene in the movie that is remotely realistic, and the only one in which Margot Kidder, who plays Jeannette, gets a chance to display her formidable acting abilities), avoid the draft, buy a car, go to a New York Knicks game, go to California, have a child, live on a farm, and go to India. Willie and Phil are supposed to have become ex-

traordinary because of their relations with Jeannette, yet they remain nondescript throughout.

This is partly the fault of the actors: Michael Ontkean, who plays Willie, is a bland ingenue who cannot speak even a well-written line without making it sound false, and Ray Sharkey, who in *Who'll Stop the Rain* displayed immense promise, overacts so furiously that one wonders if Phil

is maybe on uppers. Since they are so nondescript, and Jeannette so dully unfathomable, none of their actions assume the necessary significance. It all seems only to represent the behavior of childish, empty, and uninteresting people.

What has happened to Mazursky? On the evidence of the movie and *An Unmarried Woman*, he has been stymied by the subject that could

have supplied the richest grist for his satiric mill, the Women's Movement. He cannot poke the slightest fun at it; he seems obsessed with proving that, unlike other men, he is on the side of the fairer sex. This reverence for the Movement's ideology has castrated him as a filmmaker. And if he continues to place the liberated woman at the center of his films, he will be lost forever. □



THE PUBLIC POLICY

THE BROMIDE OF CAMPAIGN '80?

by Elliott Abrams

After the Second World War, Germany re-industrialized. Its once-mighty industrial plant had been destroyed during the War, and was rebuilt, and of course modernized and expanded.

In that context, use of the term "reindustrialization" is appropriate and the term has a clear meaning. This year, at the lexicographical inspiration and leadership of Columbia University's Amitai Etzioni, much has been heard about "reindustrializing" America. *Business Week* presented us with an entire issue under that title; the *New York Times* did a whole series on the matter. But in the context of the America of 1980, reindustrialization is a term which obfuscates rather than illuminates. The use of the term hinders clear thought about the two important issues which lie behind it: national defense policy and free market economics.

When people speak of reindustrialization, they generally have in mind two problems now facing the U.S. economy. The first is the decreasing American competitiveness in world trade, symbolized by imports of Japanese steel and autos. Second is the low rate of savings and investment as a percentage of GNP. For good reason, it is argued that the low capital formation rate is a main cause of the loss of competitiveness of American industry. Certainly this is true of the steel industry, where sufficient capital for modernization has been lacking, so that the modern and

efficient Japanese steel industry can ship iron ore and coal to Japan, produce steel, ship it to the United States, and still sell it for less than U.S. Steel can. So the United States needs to "reindustrialize" to save the balance of payments, defend the dollar, and protect American jobs, we are told. And what is meant, generally, is that more capital should be available in the right places in the economy.

Thus we quickly reach the issue of free market economics. The important question here is not what those "right places in the economy" are—steel, or computers, or autos, or biotechnology—but who will decide. The issue is the role of the state, or simply put, more capitalism or more socialism.

For one can favor two entirely different plans for "reindustrializa-

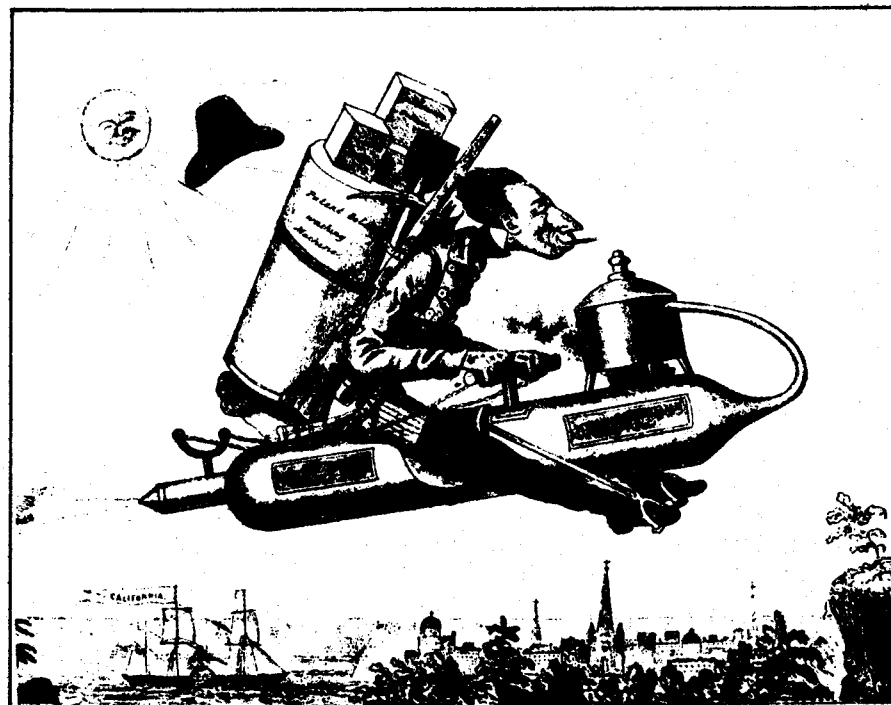
tion." A statist plan would in fact call for "national planning," with government allocation of capital to favored sectors, and a government corporation to sponsor and finance favored investment. A new Reconstruction Finance Corporation has been championed by Felix Rohatyn, the investment banker. A free market plan would make no decisions as to where capital would flow, and would simply encourage capital formation through measures such as tax incentives and regulatory reform.

This choice is the central issue in the reindustrialization debate, but is never squarely confronted. The choice before us is between more capitalism or less, and—in view of the success of national planning elsewhere—it is no wonder those favoring less hide behind a term like "reindustrialization."

There is, however, a separable national defense issue in this debate. It may be (although the case has yet to be proved) that the economics of steel or auto making, including wage rates, now favor production in Japan, or Korea, or elsewhere outside the U.S. Theories of comparative advantage would tell us, then, to go on with the building of computers or DNA and leave such products as steel or autos to others. But whatever the economic rationale for shrinking them, the steel and auto industries deserve special consideration because without them our ability to build tanks and ships and other essential military goods is greatly damaged.

Why do we hear so little of this in the reindustrialization debate? One can guess: Those who favor greater "national planning" are ordinarily not too keen on military preparedness, and the very last thing they would want is to make an argument for military spending. They want all that capital put into plowshares, not swords.

So the major issues are never discussed. An intelligent debate would ask whether we want more government, or less; whether credit and capital can be efficiently allocated by the state; whether economic and national security arguments are, to any extent, contradictory. Such a debate would help us make important choices about how to cope with our nation's diminishing savings and investment and international economic strength. Instead, voices from government, business, and labor babble on about "reindustrialization," a term so vague all parties can agree on it and yet not have a single common proposal. □



Elliott Abrams practices law in Washington, D.C.