

THE TALKIES



FAIRLY FUNNY

by Bruce Bawer

Working Girl is the archetypal eighties comedy. It's cast entirely with bankable names (Melanie Griffith, Harrison Ford, Sigourney Weaver); it's so glossily produced that you sometimes feel as if it would be much, much funnier if only it didn't look so *expensive*; it has a distracting Top-40-type score (by Carly Simon) that doesn't really suit the picture at all; it has a glamorous setting, and a get-to-the-top-of-the-heap plot, and a love interest, and a gratuitous sex scene or two; it's funny enough, and even sort of touching at times, though there's not a thing about it that you haven't seen a hundred times before. And while you'll probably leave the theater feeling entertained, you'll know that there's not much about the picture that will stick in your mind a week later.

Here's the story: Griffith plays Tess McGill, a tacky-dressing, gum-chewing, English-language-fracturing 30-year-old white-trash secretary who resides in working-class Staten Island and works at a brokerage firm on Wall Street. Like all the other white-trash secretaries who ride the ferry to work every morning, she lives in a dumpy apartment and has a going-nowhere, good-for-nothing, macho-dumbbell boyfriend (Alec Baldwin). But there's one thing that separates her from the other white-trash secretaries: she's brainy. Over the past few years, she's earned her MBA in night school, and she's determined to move up in the firm. Things look hopeless, however. She's up against a host of Ivy Leaguers—most of them men—who speak correctly, dress properly, and have the Right Look. To them, Tess is nothing more than a sex object. It doesn't help that she's utterly without tact; when one of her superiors does her wrong, she abuses him—before the entire company—on the electronic tickertape. We're supposed to like her for this: she's not stuffy like these other Wall Street types, she's *spunky*!

Not surprisingly, her spunkiness gets her fired. At her new job she finds

herself with, thank heaven, a woman boss—the beautiful and sophisticated Katharine (Sigourney Weaver), who proves to be a year younger than she is. And who proves also to be a great deal less of a blessing than Tess had thought, because when Tess comes up with an investment idea for a client, Katharine doesn't hesitate to rip it off. It's when Katharine fractures her leg on the slopes, and is hospitalized in ski country for a week or so, that Tess does something—well, spunky: she covertly steals her investment idea back and, pretending to be something more than a secretary, joins forces with Jack Trainer (Harrison Ford), a first-class, fast-lane deal-maker at another brokerage firm. In partnership with him, she proceeds, within a matter of days, to negotiate a multimillion-dollar acquisitions deal for a major corporation. Needless to say, in true-to-formula fashion, Tess and this hunky wheeler-dealer fall quickly in love—for he's not like all the other big-time Wall Street operators, you see: he *hates* networking, hates talking about money, hates the whole downtown crowd. (Sure—and Sammy Davis, Jr. hates show business.)

At any rate, in order to pull off this breathtaking coup behind Katharine's back, Tess must effect a major transformation in herself—and who else to use as a model but Katharine herself? It's weird: this young lady whose lower-middle-class look and voice and carriage have kept her from joining the ranks of the Masters of the Universe manages

somehow to turn herself overnight into a replica of the cool, elegant Katharine. What gives? Why is this transformation suddenly so easy for her to carry off, and why in heaven's name hasn't it occurred to her—or hasn't she been able—to do it before? And while we're busy asking questions, what species of morality is operating here? We're expected to feel that Tess is justified in her subterfuge because Katharine has betrayed her. But Tess isn't simply getting back at Katharine—she's putting at risk the reputation of the company that employs her, not to mention the entire career of her unwitting and innocent partner in the deal, with whom she is supposedly smitten.

What's more, the film's class values seem rather confused, to say the least. Consider this: in the tried-and-true tradition of Hollywood moviemaking, Tess and her lower-middle-class girlfriends are (without apparent exception) good and decent folks; the upper-middle-class types in the executive suites are almost entirely rotten. The only problem with Tess's life (aside from the fact that her boyfriend is a creep) is that her home, wardrobe, and neighborhood are pretty tacky—but that's not even a problem, really, because she doesn't *know* they're tacky. By her own standards, then, Tess's life doesn't seem to be missing anything important. Yet she wants nothing more than to escape from the world she knows and to move up into the world of these Ivy League snobs whom she despises—and we're supposed to cheer for her. Why?

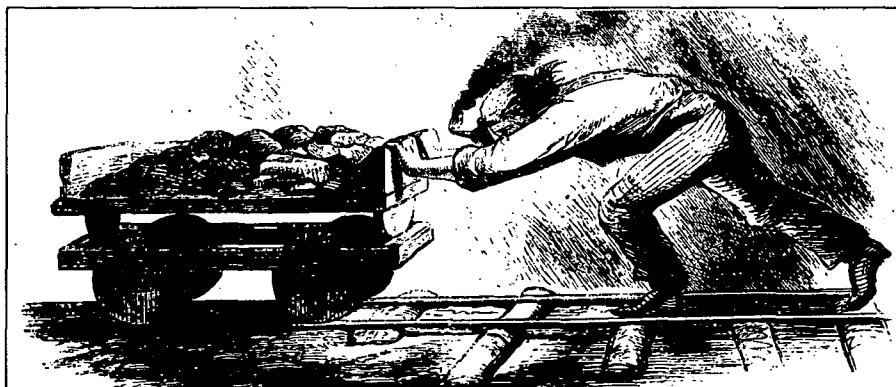
These logical inconsistencies aside,

Working Girl—written by Kevin Wade and directed by Mike Nichols—is admittedly a very slick contrivance, in the best and worst senses of the phrase, its plot as neatly worked out as it is improbable. As is usual in a film of this sort, the fat cats are rather too broadly played, but Nichols does capture nicely the atmosphere of those gray, Pennsylvania-steel-town-like working-class communities that line the northern tier of Staten Island. And he captures the residents of these communities too: one of the film's most memorable images is the sight of Joan Cusack—in the role of Tess's best friend—wearing matching orange-and-blue earrings and eyeshadow. But the question remains: Are we supposed to laugh condescendingly at these people or identify with them? Nichols and Wade apparently want to have it both ways.

The leading cast is a mixed bag. Griffith possesses the sort of annoying, monotonous voice that a couple of generations ago would have kept an actress from becoming a movie star (and with good reason). Nonetheless she is appropriately endearing, for the most part (although she fails to make Tess's penchant for the occasional vulgar insult seem anything but ugly), and carries out with aplomb her character's metamorphosis into a graceful swan. Ford, meanwhile, in the role of the driven-yet-decent mover-and-shaker who is also Tess's love interest (and who, incidentally, embodies a contradiction or two of his own), exudes the requisite middle-aged-boyish charm and energy. Yet it is Weaver who lingers longest in the mind. Her character, Katharine, may be a devil, but she's got a lot more style and poise than most heroines in American movies nowadays, and Weaver plays her with great verve. This is a role that the young Katharine Hepburn would've sunk her teeth into, and Weaver does it proud.

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Who's Harry Crumb? Long answer: he's a bumbling oaf of a private investigator, "the last in a long line of great detectives," who has been



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Nor do they have a very clear bead on their principal character. They apparently think it is sufficient, for their comedic purposes, to have Harry say

-- Congressman Robert Dornan

BOOK REVIEWS

Jaime Escalante first received national attention late in 1982 as the barrio math teacher whose twelve students bested the Educational Testing Service by retaking and passing the Advanced Placement (AP) calculus exam on which they had been accused of cheating. Since that episode Escalante's efforts have placed East Los Angeles's Garfield High, with a 95 percent Hispanic student body, fourth among all public high schools nationally in the number of students taking AP calculus exams. The only private school sending more students to the exams is Andover. In 1987, Escalante's school produced more than 26 percent of all Mexican-Americans in the country who received a passing grade in AP calculus.

As Jay Mathews, Los Angeles bureau chief for the *Washington Post*, writes in *Escalante: The Best Teacher in America*, those twelve students "vindicated themselves, Garfield, Escalante, East Los Angeles, the Los Angeles Unified School District, and—many community members declared—Mexican-Americans everywhere." Indeed, the outrage at the presumption of the Princeton-based testing conglomerate that Mexican-American students were unlikely to score well on the AP exam did not fade away. It eventually inspired the film *Stand and Deliver* (to be aired on PBS's "American Playhouse" on March 15), in which "Miami Vice" star and East Los Angeles native Edward James Olmos plays the pudgy, balding dynamo, Escalante.

Mathews's book offers a fuller and more intriguing look at this teacher-celebrity than the film, which is, after all, subject to the dramaturgical limitations of watching kids study calculus. Mathews begins with Escalante in his native Bolivia, where both his parents were ill-paid schoolteachers. After several frustrating years of teaching in La Paz, Escalante immigrated to Los Angeles in 1963 at the age of thirty-three. In addition to his knowledge of higher math and his teaching skills, he brought with him a crafty, profane hardness that one might associate with peasants from the Indian villages on Bolivia's altiplano, where his parents were teaching when he was born. Indeed, through Mathews's eyes we see Escalante as a gruff, manipulative, often brutally honest and, at times,

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ESCALANTE: THE BEST TEACHER IN AMERICA

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almost malicious eccentric who is willing to try anything to get his students to learn math. I say "learn math" advisedly, because Escalante's single-minded approach leaves little energy or tolerance for students and teachers interested in sports, music, and even history or English. As a result, Mathews points out, Escalante has more than his share of enemies in the Los Angeles public schools. Yet Mathews also shows that Escalante is revered—perhaps not exactly loved, but in many cases that too—by his students.

As the subtitle suggests, this book tries to capitalize on the persistent education reform movement. Yet aside from reminding us that disadvantaged students need to be challenged and good teachers need to be left alone by the kind of bureaucracy Escalante has had to battle, Mathews doesn't have much to say about urban education today. There's no mention of parental choice or voucher schemes, which he may justifiably consider beyond the scope of his book. Mathews does mention merit pay, about which he expresses some perfunctory skepticism.

So the value of this book lies elsewhere. In his sharp-eyed vignettes of Escalante, his students, and their families, Mathews provides an extremely clear, uncluttered window on contemporary Mexican-American urban life. Yet his steadfast reportorial stance also means Mathews does not tell us as much about Mexican-Americans as he might have. Still, he tells us quite a lot.

Mathews goes beyond stale horror stories about big-city education bureaucracies and inner-city teachers who either give up on their students or do nothing innovative that would threaten or challenge their colleagues. These get their due, but Mathews's honesty leads him to the equally frustrating problems a teacher like Escalante has struggling with barrio parents and their kids prone to settling for less than they deserve.

For example, Mathews offers an anecdote that was also depicted in the movie about Escalante. Leticia Rodriguez is the third of seven children of a couple who met in Mexico, came to the United States as cooks, and eventually started their own small restaurant west of downtown Los Angeles—

an apparent American success story. Yet when Leticia's trigonometry interfered with her responsibilities at the family's restaurant, where her math skills were desperately needed, Escalante paid a visit to her parents, who were demanding the girl drop his class. After sitting through Escalante's pitch about Leticia's potential, the father (to whom the mother had already deferred) retorted: "Women are just here to get married and have kids and that's all." Despite this pronouncement—and with some threats about violations of the child labor laws—Escalante eventually prevailed, and the girl stayed in his class.

Mathews tells this story not to illustrate the patriarchal nature of barrio families, but to demonstrate how modest are the expectations some barrio parents have for their children. The point is emphasized when Mathews relates an episode about Escalante telephoning a father whose son had missed two algebra homework assignments. "Maybe he's just not right for your class, Mr. Escalante," said the father. "He'll probably work in the body shop when he graduates. That's a good job. Or he can get work as a janitor."

Not all such obstacles are this dramatic. Explaining why Escalante requires his students to stay after school every day until five o'clock, and why he requires students and their parents to sign a contract agreeing to such a requirement, Mathews observes:

That was to remind the parents as much as their children of the seriousness of the venture. Many adults living in East Los Angeles had never even attended a high school, much less taken a college-level course in one. They had to be persuaded the time might not be better spent in chores at home.

In the same vein, we hear a Mexican-American mother fretting over her daughter's frantic schedule. Getting up at two or three in the morning to study calculus until breakfast, when the seven other people in the two-bedroom house where she lives resume their normal activities and noise, Escalante's student is told: "Your first priority should be your religion, your family and friends. What good is a nice B in some class if you're in the hospital? Lay off the studies. Go have some fun."

Even when such kids manage to excel in school and are offered handsome scholarships from Ivy League colleges, they and their families hesitate and

