



by James Bowman

Come Rain or Come Shine

Love usually means having to say you're sorry.

Even the title of *The Mirror Has Two Faces* by Barbra Streisand is a lie. The mirror only has one face. It is she who is supposed to have two—the putatively dull, dowdy, plain Rose Morgan, perennial wallflower, who is selected by the Spock-like math professor, Gregory Larkin (Jeff Bridges), specifically for her unattractiveness, and the made-over Rose who knocks his eye out and makes him love her for real. The joke is that there is hardly any difference between the original and the made-over Rose. Miss Streisand is so paranoid about her appearance that she cannot bring herself to look genuinely unattractive. Thus, after the montage of diet and exercise and beauty treatments that she undertakes, like a kind of female Rocky, she ends up looking just the same except that her hair is more unkempt, and a different color, and she is now showing us those trademark Streisand legs, hitherto kept carefully bagged as a shorthand way of telling us that her character is supposed to be fat.

Admittedly, this is not quite as funny as the idea of Babs as a professor at Columbia, holding a packed lecture hall of undergraduates spellbound with her explication of courtly love in the Middle Ages. But clearly the whole film is an exercise in self-indulgence and wish-fulfillment. Beyond this it has only one point to make, which is a defense of romantic, passionate love against what she erroneously supposes to be the Platonic ideal of those old-time courtly lovers. Oddly, however, for

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this feel-good picture, she uses a couple of crowd-pleasers from Puccini's *Turandot* to symbolize romance without a thought for the opera's tragic dimension. This, we have to understand, is California passion, or passion-lite. Passion as a rare non-chemical high out of the designer pharmacopoeia, and with all the suffering taken out of it.

A reminder that this view of love has not always held sway, even in Hollywood, came with the release of a restored version of *Vertigo*, originally made in 1958 by Alfred Hitchcock. Here the relationship between love and suffering, even madness, is explored in the guise of a murder mystery. "Scottie" Ferguson (James Stewart) becomes obsessed with a woman (Kim Novak) who seemingly kills herself. When he finds someone who, he thinks, is her double, he obsessively tries to remake her in the image of the woman he fell in love with. The theme of vertigo—the fear of falling both literally and metaphorically into an abyss of love which is also madness—possesses the film up until its final moments when suddenly there is a bizarre Hitchcockian resolution. After the descent into madness, we are abruptly yanked back into the real world where neither the hope of love nor the fear of heights is anything but illusory.

One cannot help but feel that Hitchcock himself had looked into the abyss, and that not only this but all his cynical, brittle films were made as a sort of hedge or fence to keep himself well away from it. Remarkably, however, Hitchcock steps back from his self-identification with the male's fear of a loss of control to represent also the female fear of a loss of identity.

Perhaps the most poignant and significant moment in the film comes when the woman says to the mad-looking Scottie, "If I let you change me, will that do it? Will you love me?" It is the question that haunts all women in love, although it never seems to trouble Miss Streisand to whom it would never occur to think that her splendid self might be diminished by love.

In *Breaking the Waves* by Lars von Trier, winner of the Grand Jury Prize at Cannes this year, the heroine also has no doubts, but that is because she doesn't hesitate to sacrifice herself for the man she loves. Here is love with none of the true passion and suffering taken out of it, love almost in the old-fashioned heroic and operatic style. But, as it is the nineties, von Trier adds an element of kinkiness to keep his jaded audience watching.

Bess MacNeill (Emily Watson) is a slightly simple-minded Scottish girl whose family belongs to a particularly severe Calvinist sect. It is the mid-1970's, and their community is beginning to open up to the world a little with the arrival of North Sea oil workers. One of these, a fun-loving Scandinavian called Jan (Stellan Skarsgård), Bess falls in love with. She manages to persuade the elders to allow her to marry him. But when Jan has to go back to his oil rig, Bess becomes frantic. She can't bear to be apart from him. She has long conversations with her stern Calvinist God in which she chastises herself, in His voice, for her weakness and impatience. But in her own voice she continues to insist that she wants Jan back at any price, under any circumstances.

Her prayer is answered. There is an accident on the oil rig and Jan comes back paralyzed from the neck down. When he

regains consciousness and realizes that he will be paralyzed for the rest of his life, Jan decides that he has to force Bess to be free of him. "She's got to get out of here, get on with life," he tells her sister-in-law, Dodo (Katrin Cartlidge), who unwittingly contributes to the tragedy by telling him, "She would do anything for you, to put a smile on your face. Do you understand me?" He thinks he does, anyway, and tells her that he will die unless he can remember the sensations of physical love, so he needs her to go out and have sex with other men and tell him about it. She doesn't want to at all, but he tells her that it will save his life.

From this point on, Bess's primitive religious sensibility takes over. Her continual bargaining with God seems to sanction a series of loveless, anonymous sexual encounters to help Jan, although it gets her ostracized from her church and community and nearly institutionalized. Ultimately, she convinces herself that to be killed during a violent sex session with a sinister trawlerman (Udo Kier) is what is necessary to save him, as Jan is slipping further and further towards death. As in some old story from the Lives of the Saints, with her death Jan experiences a miraculous recovery. He is even able to walk with the help of crutches. And after Bess's funeral, at which the smug elders consign her soul to hell, she works another miracle of a sort which hasn't been seen in the movies since Bing Crosby was a priest.

The film is worth seeing for the stunning performance of Miss Watson as Bess, but there is at the heart of it an insurmountable incoherence: it never succeeds in explaining why Jan decides Bess should sleep with other men. Von Trier wants us to think Dodo and others are mistaken in thinking that it is because of Jan's sick and twisted imagination—that he is really doing it, or *thinks* he is, for Bess, just as she is doing it, or thinks she is, for him. But it is too fantastical that he should ask her to do what supposedly torments and disgusts him because it is the only way she can "get on with her life." What kind of life, exactly, does he want her to get on with? He cannot possibly continue to suppose that the kind of sex she is having is good for *her*. The real

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point of it all, I think, is just to discredit the narrowness and hypocrisy of the film's Christians and to present an alternative religious statement on behalf of the Church of What's Happenin' Now. The notion that there is a kind of secret sanctity prepared to shed its grace on perverted sex acts is doubtless what appealed to the Cannes jury.

It may be that the movies are not suited to the representation of grand and tragic passion, and that the best we can hope for them is a balance of love's destructive and constructive forces. That, at any rate, is what we get in the Movie of the Month, the Australian film *Shine* by Scott Hicks. This is the based-on-fact story of David Helfgott, a brilliant young pianist who had a serious mental breakdown after being spurned by his father for trying to assert his independence. Geoffrey Rush as the grown up David, a non-stop talker and smoker with a nervous detachment from reality that often produces ludicrous scenes, contributes a terrific performance, but as good if not better is Armin Mueller-Stahl as his tyrannical father, a concentration camp survivor who, having lost his whole family in the Holocaust, is determined to create a new one in defiance of God and the world. To do this he must exercise absolute control over his family and especially his talented son.

It would be easy to ham up a role like this, but Mueller-Stahl plays it with an understatement that makes his character the more believable. In other hands, this man's insistence that he is "as proud as a father can be" of his son's talent and

that he loves him so much that he can confidently assure him that "no one will ever love you as much as your father" would be mere cant and hypocrisy, a transparent excuse for his tyrannical regime. But here it is a sign of his genuine, if excessive love. The elder Helfgott has to understand that his virtue is also his vice, and that holding too tightly is the way to lose. He cannot understand it, and David's talent and his life are both irretrievably shattered.

The teenage David is played by Noah Taylor, who was such an ornament to that splendid film of a couple of years ago called *Flirting*. He has the look of the troubled teenager down pat—the boy who still wets his bed and lives in terror of his father's love. He repeats mechanically the old man's axioms—"Only the fit survive; the weak are crushed. You have to be fit and strong." Of course it is only in defying his father and taking a scholarship at the Royal College of Music in London, that David can prove his fitness—but it also breaks him. His father tells him that "You will never come back into this house again. You will never be anybody's son. Your sisters will have no brother if you leave me." And then: "Don't go."

The pathos of this desperate pleading, like the grim determination with which he proceeds to burn the pages of his lovingly tended scrapbook of David's triumphs, is unforgettable. Unfortunately, the second half of the film, dealing with David's career at the Royal College of Music under the tuition of John Gielgud, and his subsequent breakdown after a performance of the "monumental" Rachmaninoff Third Piano Concerto ("the Rack Three" as the old prof familiarly calls it), is less impressive. Brilliant as Rush's performance is, Hicks never quite reconciles the comedy and the pathos in David's madness, or in his love affair with and eventual marriage to Gillian (Lynn Redgrave), who provides the inspiration for him to go back on the concert stage. But still, it is good for us to be reminded that love can heal as well as destroy. ❧

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The Most Modern of Men

His Holiness:

John Paul II and the Hidden History of Our Time

Carl Bernstein and Marco Politi
Doubleday / \$27.50 / 582 pages

REVIEWED BY

William McGurn

I have met John Paul twice in my life. The first time was back in August 1987 at his summer residence at Castel Gandolfo, when a friend in the diplomatic corps squeezed me into an audience the pope was giving to a congressional delegation led by Charles Rangel of New York. Two things remain fixed in my mind from that encounter. The first was how small the pope was, almost petite and yet unequivocally muscular, like a Korean boxer. The other was that in his presence even Congressman Rangel exuded a genuine humility. Not an outright miracle perhaps, but certainly not in the realm of the ordinary.

My second encounter came in March, when I was back in Rome for a Vatican conference on economics featuring Nobel laureate Gary Becker. At the appointed hour we made our way to the entrance to the papal apartments. Up we went on the long steps of the Scala Regia, past the Swiss Guards, past the statue of Constantine visible from the portico of St. Peter's, until presently we were led to a reception room featuring walls covered with Flemish tapestries and a throne-like chair. Gradually we settled and hushed. And when John Paul finally entered, I was again startled by his appearance.

In the decade since I had last seen him up close, Mikhail Gorbachev had come

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cap in hand to these gates; the Berlin Wall had been breached; Lech Walesa had moved from outlaw union leader to president of a new Polish republic; and the United States had backed down, in the face of the pope's almost solitary campaign against it, on plans to use the U.N. Conference on Population and Development in Cairo to establish a worldwide right to abortion. Yet it was not the church triumphant we saw in this pope. He still had the look of a boxer, to be sure, but one who had gone more rounds than a human body was meant to endure.

Looking at the eyes peering out at us from that magnificent Polish face, I thought of the special tour my family had had the previous day of the Scavi, the special excavations underneath the altar of St. Peter's, on the spot where the Apostle's bones are thought to rest. Toward the end, the fresh-faced American seminarian guiding us pointed to the murals on the ceilings surrounding the crypt. "The next time most of you see these," he told us, "will be as the TV cameras follow John Paul's mortal remains to their final resting place." Looking at the hunched figure before us, his hand shaking from Parkinson's, I understood how he might look forward to that day with relief.

For the many millions around the world who each Sunday reaffirm their faith in "one holy, Catholic and apostolic church," the idea of trying to render into words the power of a pope like John Paul is an exercise doomed to fall flat. Apart from those who have reason to suspect they might appear in its index, most Catholics tend to treat a book like *His Holiness* with indifference, operating on the assumption that it is directed not at them but to a general audience to whom the Roman church remains a bit of exotica. Had I not been asked to review this book, I doubt I would have read it.

By any criteria, however, the story of Karol Wojtyla is an extraordinary one. And in an age where the Madonna of Titian has been superseded by the Madonna of MTV, Chastity is the lesbian daughter of Cher, and Jesus Christ a superstar, it is only fitting that John Paul would attract as his Boswell a corresponding star in his own field, Carl Bernstein. And if that seems just a tad incongruous, he would acquire as co-author an Italian newsman with almost mirror credentials: Marco Politi, a longtime papal watcher for the left-leaning daily *La Repubblica*.

For those familiar with the Woodstein canon, *His Holiness* hews close to formula: a titillating thesis, delivered in dramatic form with an emphasis on quantity of research (interviews with "more than three hundred individuals") meant to compensate for the obvious problem of not having had a one-on-one interview with the subject himself. Of the hundreds of source notes, for example, the only direct quotations from John Paul that Politi provides are obviously back-of-the-plane asides delivered to a group of reporters in the course of one of his trips. None of this prevents the authors from divining exactly what was on the pope's mind at any given time, all delivered with an aura of infallibility any bishop of Rome might envy.

The result is, if not the "definitive portrait" the dust jacket claims, a work that hits a surprising number of high notes. The book's prescience varies considerably according to its three broad topics: a first part that deals with the pope's early life, which is interesting, if largely lifted from previously published Polish materials; a second part which chronicles John Paul's challenge to, and ultimate triumph over, the established Communist order of Eastern Europe—which borders on the epic; and a final part dealing with the post-collapse redeployment of the pope's legions against what he has called a "cul-