



ALL PHOTOS: AP/WIDE WORLD

Love it or

**During the Kosovo War, the U.S. used this Balkan land as
a staging ground for its bombing runs. But no sooner did
the war end than we abandoned it to the misery and
wretched life it's always known.** **MATTHEW STEVENSON**

Albania is one of the riddles of the Eastern Question. It seems incredible that a fine country, with at least two harbors possible of development, and within a few hours' steam of Italy, should be the most uncivilized land in the Balkan peninsula, and that for centuries no European power should have made any serious attempt to acquire it as a colony. Thus what might be one of the finest countries in Europe, is left in a condition such as nowadays disgraces few Central African tribes.

—1905 travelogue

At the turn of the millennium, on the assumption that it lay beyond the computer horizon, I spent a week in Albania—my first look at the country for which, in Kosovo, the Holy NATO Empire fought its savage war of peace. On my invitation it was noted that I was there to fish from the pool of state assets, stocked for privatization. But even if I was reluctant to bid for a stake in the Karl Marx hydroelectric plant, I did want to fulfill a lifetime dream to see what remains of Enver Hoxha's brave old world.

A subsidiary of Swissair flies daily from Zurich to Tirana, the Albanian capital. On this clear January afternoon, the Jumbolino crossed the spine of the Italian Alps and flew down the Dalmatian coast. Tirana lies 35 miles inland, at the head of a broad valley. Behind the capital is a long white line of snow-capped peaks, over which NATO fighters flew their missions into nearby Kosovo and Yugoslavia. But before clearing for our final approach, we circled above the Adriatic, and I caught a glimpse

At Rinas Airport arriving passengers walk from the plane to the terminal along a palm-fringed promenade, a pleasant respite from accordion jetways, although inside, the arrival hall has the feel of a Balkan bus station. I paid \$45 for a visa, but the man behind me paid \$55. Baggage claim meant chasing down a free-lance handler who had a prior lien on the luggage trolleys. As I was met by a car and driver, I was spared jostling for a taxi among the huddled masses yearning to breathe dollars.

Until it merges with an industrial suburb, the road into the city snakes across dust bowl farmland, notable for the absence of tilled soil and for its crops of architectural folly. Fields may lie fallow, the sad harvest, first of central planning and now a capital shortage. But on many hectares there is the work-in-progress of stillborn villas: incomplete three- and four-story houses that await either a family conference, the return of a construction team, or the next remittance from Milan.

Elsewhere in the countryside are the concrete igloos of Hoxha's civil defense plan. After the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968, when Albania's only patrons were in China, Hoxha ordered that 400,000 bunkers be built around the country. On the shore, in fields, on hillsides, almost everywhere, you come across these crumbling pillboxes—the People's Maginot line—now as difficult to comprehend as the mathematical equations that show up in Iowa cornfields.

Leave it!

of the Karaburun Peninsula, whose unknown chapter in the Cold War I was reading on the flight.

In *Betrayed*, Lord Nicholas Bethell, the English historian, describes the hapless missions launched by Britain and the U.S. in the late 1940's to overthrow the Hoxha government. The idea was to land covert operatives in Albania who would then lead the call to arms. The North Atlantic allies had sought to detach Tirana from the Soviet orbit, which with little opposition had established satellites in Poland and Czechoslovakia. But the British liaison officer in Washington was Harold "Kim" Philby, and he betrayed the missions. At Karaburun and elsewhere, the operatives found it was the secret police who were waiting, not the rebel cry of freedom. Hoxha followed up the incursions with executions and show trials, to strengthen his power, and later as a pretext to seal Albania from imperialist designs.

MATTHEW STEVENSON (matthewstevenson@compuserve.com) is a frequent contributor to TAS and lives in Switzerland.

Dead Puppets Dance in Tirana

Until the 1920's, Tirana was a sleepy Balkan village. But Ahmed Zogu's royal pretensions—he proclaimed himself King Zog I in 1928—and the work of Italian architects transformed it into a regional capital. "Much of the domestic state budget went on public buildings during Zog's reign," British historian Miranda Vickers writes in *The Albanians*. "In fact, of the 11 million Albanian gold francs budgeted between 1928 and 1938, 75 percent went on the construction of public and other residential edifices in the capital, which then had a population of around 25,000."

For a while Tirana was the Brasilia or Canberra of the Balkans. As well, like many U.S. state capitals, it was a geographical compromise. Even today a tribal fault line divides Albania between Ghegs in the north and Tosks in the south, and—in a country where guns are everywhere—it was estimated recently that 60,000 people still had a stake in a blood feud.

Between checking into an Austrian-run hotel and my first meetings, I had both a car and driver and time to explore the city. A city of open sewers, sidewalk bazaars, and idle throngs, Tirana has the forlorn look of a city in Soviet Central Asia, a hub of dust and socialist realism. Near downtown, the university looks like



a warehouse district, and most apartment buildings, in several ways, appear held together with clothesline. But such are the city's borrowed metaphors that a 1930's travelogue, *Dead Puppet's Dance*, could describe the Parliament as looking "like a Methodist Chapel transplanted from a London suburb."

At the city's center is Skanderbeg Square, which mixes Stalinist urban planning with a few Maoist sensibilities. Around a space about the size of Red Square is a Palace of Culture, the central bank, and a national museum, including a fresco of Albanian peasants on a long march toward the new world order. In the fifteenth century, Skanderbeg led an uprising against the Turks, and his mounted bronze reincarnation bestrides a corner of the plaza, although his Viking helmet makes him look like a Norse god on Pegasus.

Elsewhere what defines the city is trash, as if garbage men were swept away in a purge as revisionists. At one time there was a popular Kosovar expression: "The streets of Tirana are so clean because the Albanians have nothing to throw away." But times have changed, and today if rubbish were an economic indicator, Albania would find itself in the growth tables of Singapore. Vacant lots, roadsides, parking lots, and even window sills at important ministries bear witness that Albanians have joined the ranks of the disposable society.

In some corners of Tirana, minarets are all that is distinctive on the monochromatic skyline. Nominally Albania is a Moslem country. But most of the mosques look as forlorn as the shop windows. Hoxha suppressed religion, fearing Catholic encroachments or Orthodox hegemony. One of the ironies of Kosovo is that Moslem Albanians often took better care of the Serbian Orthodox churches than did their parishioners. More recently the Pope has described Albania as an emerging market, perhaps in keeping with a local expression: "Where the sword is, there lies religion."

Friend Enver

As a winter fog encased the city, I stood before the gates of the former Hoxha residence, a sprawling complex that anywhere in Eastern Europe could be a People's Hall of Friendship. Until Communism fell in 1992, Albanians were barred from the neighborhood, lest they glimpse the leadership—a bit like Boo Radley—living in their gated mansions. Today several guards, with the air of forlorn retainers, patrol the grounds. Otherwise

the house is dark, save for the security lamps, which glow in the mist, as if it were still darkness at noon.

Even though, during Hoxha's time in power, a leading Albanian export was his collected works, not many can recall particular details about the Communist dictator. He got his start as a Party functionary, but only reached power as the agent of the Yugoslav general secretary, Marshal Tito. During the war Hoxha was just one of many Partisan officers who fought both the Axis occupation and their domestic foes, real or imagined. On the battlefield he is noteworthy for campaigning with his catamite. Only after the war did he consolidate his reign of terror with Yugoslav backing.

When his master, Tito, broke with the Soviets, Hoxha supported Moscow. But the suggestions of Khrushchev, among others, that Albania's future lay as a Soviet banana republic pushed Hoxha into the arms of the Chinese, who littered the countryside with now decaying industrial works. He dated his fear of imperialism to the betrayed 1949 covert actions.

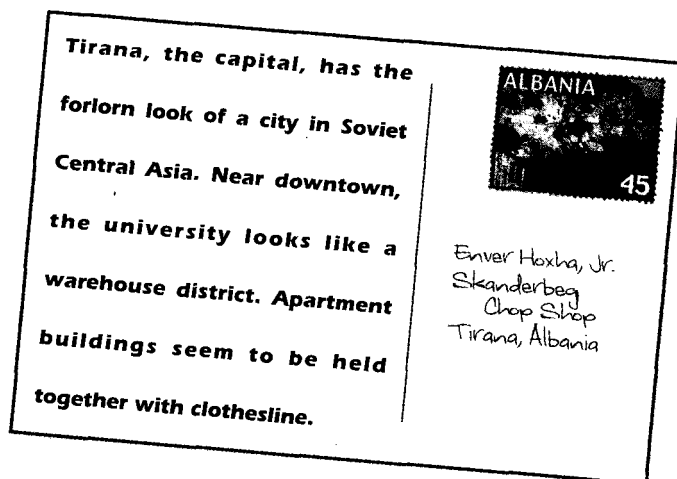
Such was Hoxha's paranoia that his food taster worked overtime, as apparently did others in his retinue. He led an opulent lifestyle but went by the epithet *Shokut* or Friend. It was natural causes that dispatched him to his tomb, an enormous marble wigwam in downtown Tirana that, after the Communist liquidation, some wanted to convert to a disco.

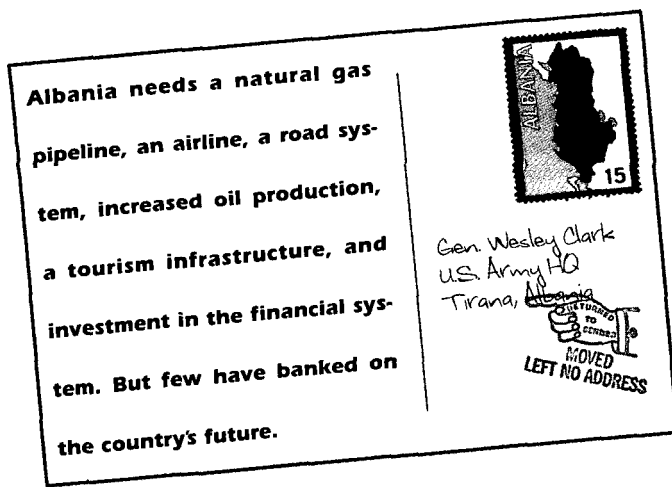
In the damp chill of the national museum, I was the only visitor. The attendants and guards never stirred from their corner space heaters, so I walked alone among the marble busts of Albania's Greek, Roman, and Byzantine past. Albanians cling to their Illyrian origins, in part to distance themselves from neighboring Slavs, but also to stake the earliest possible claim to Kosovo.

During Hoxha's curatorship, the museum celebrated the heroic people's struggle. But after 1992—to the country's credit—the directors posted a roll call of those killed during "the Communist occupation" from 1949–1992. As at the Vietnam Memorial, the names are listed on stark tablets, and maps show where each fell, including those whose blood remains on Philby's hands. The exhibit also re-creates a prison cell of the secret police—further testament to the Albanian obsession with concrete bunkers.

Albanian Banks: Where The Money Isn't

My first business meeting was up a dark flight of stairs at the





Ministry of Public Economy and Privatization, in an office the temperature of a meat locker. I made the mistake of taking off my overcoat and, during the presentation, my mind wandered to warmth and dinner instead of the case the minister made for an Albanian investment.

Most of the men running the Albanian economy are in their thirties and forties, as if the government were an Internet company. I liked each that I met and admired their optimism. Many were trained abroad and used phrases like “foreign investment” and “joint-venture” as easily as those earlier, perhaps in this same meeting room, had quoted the theorems of Marx and Engels.

With our breath misting over the conference table, we reviewed the privatization as though discussing a five-year plan. Albania needs a natural gas pipeline, an airline, a road system, increased oil production, a tourism infrastructure, and investment in the financial system. But few beyond the Clinton administration have banked on Albania’s future, and even then Washington has put little into the country aside from its displays at the air show over Kosovo.

So far investments have been limited to Greek and Italian companies, many run by Albanian expatriates. International oil corporations have not tried to colonize the off-shore oil acreage, despite whispers of reserves exceeding a billion barrels. What sends most transactions to the dustbin of deals are the terms. When I interrupted one meeting to ask what investors would get if they invested \$60 million in a certain project, everyone fell silent, as if in warning my hands I had, by accident, given the Zogist salute.

As best as I could tell, Albania is one of the few countries outside Africa that missed the economic revolutions of the twentieth century. Prior to 1939, when he fled the Italian invasion to the Ritz Hotel in London, King Zog had franchised the economy’s few assets to Rome’s interests, and his ministers took the rest, giving rise to a popular expression: “True, there are no brigands in Albania, because all of them have gone to Tirana, where they rob with authority from behind their desks.”

After the war, Friend Enver sublet the economy to Mao’s theories of industrial self-sufficiency. In remote valleys he used the country’s limited foreign aid to build Chinese oil refineries and power stations. Petroleum production reached two million tons a year, far below the country’s requirements, so he banned

the private ownership of cars and rationed the balance to Party stalwarts, who proved as demanding as the king’s courtiers. In short, Albania spent most of the twentieth century devouring its own — resources or otherwise.

In the transition from Communism to capitalism, governments became impossible to distinguish from hedge funds or crime syndicates, where a perk of office is to leverage influence in cornered markets. In the mid-1990’s, for example, the ruling Democrat Party did brisk business in fuel oil, girls, cigarettes, drugs, and weapons, not to mention running one of the many Ponzi schemes whose collapse in 1997 brought down the government of Dr. Sali Berisha — adding Albania to the footnotes of *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*.

Looking for Work in a BMW

The premise behind Albania’s pyramid schemes differed little from the asset and liability management of an Arkansas savings-and-loan. Alluring deposit rates blinded customers to the reality that their investments were worth little more than Dutch tulips, and before long the shareholders had skipped town, leaving clients to ponder a future without either toasters or deposit insurance.

Despite the economic three-card Monty, the central bank has recently maintained the *lek* as one of eastern Europe’s more stable currencies, even if most foreign exchange dealers crowd the sidewalks outside the bank rather than the desks of its trading rooms. Albania has few commodities to export, and lives on the remittances of overseas workers, who send in about \$1 million a day. The country has 13 banks and about \$300 million in foreign reserves. Like Washington, Tirana covers the trade deficit with easy money from abroad.

After some meetings, we would drive into the countryside as part of the due diligence. Albanian roads, which have seen little improvement since the Italian occupation in the 1930’s, are rivers of potholes. Car rides feel like descents into white water. One morning, for example, it took us four hours to drive 70 miles south, and thus we had to abandon our hope to inspect either the tourist potential of Vlore or a refinery at Ballsh, both of which were only another 20 miles down the road.

Since the ban on the private ownership of automobiles was lifted in 1991, Albanians have made up for lost time by building up a fleet in which — as even ministers acknowledge — 60 percent





of the cars are stolen, most from Western Europe. The average Albanian wage is between \$100 and \$200 a month, and judging by the throngs of idle men in most town squares or those selling roadside soda, unemployment is the highest in Europe. But pitching among the potholes are the latest Mercedes and BMWs, part of what a World Bank report might call invisible imports.

The Pyramid Collapses on Kosovo

The Albanian economy as the province of pyramid schemes and stolen cars would have no more consequence than Hoxha's paranoia, except that it was the country's domestic anarchy that set in motion the events that led to war in Kosovo.

A consequence of the pyramid-scheme collapse in 1997 was the government's fall, during which the stores of the Albanian army were looted. More than a million guns and rounds of ammunition were hauled off. When arms sales and barter put this weaponry in the hands of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), the dream of rebellion became a reality.

In searching for the causes of war, the NATO alliance only found reasons in Belgrade: Milosevic had revoked Kosovo's 1974 autonomy and flouted the diktats of Rambouillet; Serbia ruled the province by oppression and fiat; without intervention, the Serbian predilection for ethnic cleansing would bring another Holocaust to the region. But it was by Allied design that Kosovo was Serbian for most of the twentieth century.

Turkish for 500 years, Kosovo was a spoil of the First World War, awarded to Serbia after it lost a fifth of its population fighting the Central Powers. Following the Italian and German occupations of World War II, when an Albanian division fought ruthlessly for the Nazis, Tito made it an autonomous region within Serbia, both to weaken Serbian influence in Yugoslavia and to placate Albanian separatist sentiments. But when his dream of a Communist Balkan federation, incorporating Bulgaria and Albania, faltered, Kosovo became yet another minority stepchild, caught between Serb nationalism and Hoxha's bunker mentality.

Similarly, Kosovo has never been an easy issue for Albanian governments. When I raised it in conversation, I generally got a standard answer that Albania has few problems with nearby countries, save for Serbia. But since its creation in 1912, Albania has been at odds with its neighbors. The Greeks have a long sim-

mering claim to southern Albania, which has a largely Greek population. In turn, with its large Albanian minority, Macedonia fears a rerun of Kosovo.

Kosovars have often dismissed the Albanians across the border as poor relations and feared unification, much the way many in Northern Ireland want nothing to do with the Republic. Nor did they welcome those Albanians who fled into Kosovo seeking the prize of a Yugoslav passport, on which they could flee Hoxha's regime. Although both Zog and Hoxha avoided irredentism to cultivate better relations with Belgrade, the post-pyramid governments had to support insurrection in Kosovo, lest they find themselves the target of the looted guns that were eventually aimed at the Serbs.

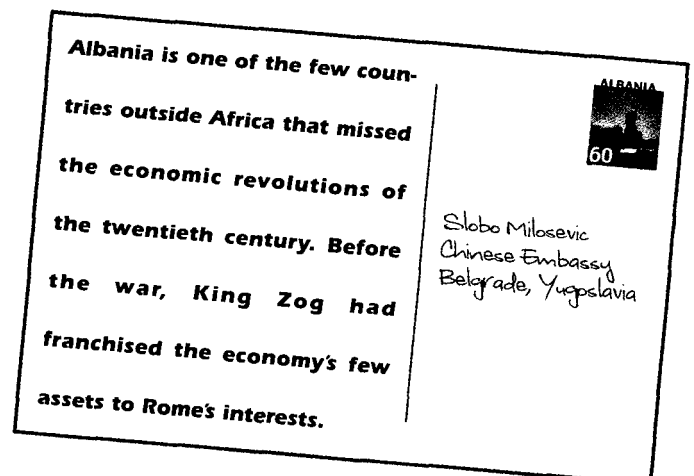
Throughout the 1990's the United States has thought it could impose peace in the Balkans by drawing Wilsonian borders around the feuding nationalities, even though an ethnic map of the region looks like a Jackson Pollock painting. In 1908, after traveling through Albania, the English writer, Edith Durham, described the futility of setting policy by Balkan borders: "The frontiers drawn by the Treaty of Berlin were so impossible that in many places they could not be defined, much less enforced. As the borderers themselves described it.... The frontier floated on blood."

The Audit of War

Waiting for the flight home at Rinas Airport, where much American weaponry was staged for the attacks on Serbia, I recalled the after-action reports, few of which justify the press notices of the Clinton administration that Kosovo was a splendid little war.

According to the BBC's *Audit of War*, it cost NATO \$4 billion to drop 23,000 bombs on the remnants of Yugoslavia. Some 10,000 bombs, scattered across Yugoslavia, never exploded, to create future havoc for farmers or curious children—the same group at risk to run across the depleted uranium dropped to revive the Prizren League. The 78-day air campaign killed about 600 Yugoslav soldiers and, depending on whose figures you believe, disabled either 13 or 93 enemy tanks—which for Gen. George Patton would have been an afternoon's work.

In its lavish ways, the U.S. Army alone paid \$480 million to move its Apache helicopters to Albania, where they never fired a missile in anger. Just to position the squadron at Rinas Airport,



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Kim Philby
Lenin Mausoleum
Moscow, Russia

according to the *Washington Post*, required an escort of M1 Abrams tanks, 6,200 soldiers, 42 support vehicles, and another 37 Chinook and Black Hawk helicopters. But after two Apaches crashed during training missions, the armada returned home to base, save for the equipment that later turned up in Albania's used car market.

At war's end many of the 800,000 Kosovar refugees (who fled NATO's blitz as they did Milosevic's goons) returned home. But the Allies turned a cynical eye to the cleansing of 150,000 Serbs from Kosovo—much as in 1914 they went to war to defend violated Belgian neutrality, but nine months later promised to partition Albania to entice Italy to the Allied side.

Nor could the Clinton administration prove its Holocaust charges against the Serbian government. Toward the end of 1999, 2,108 Kosovar war dead had been found, not many more than the numbers of Yugoslav civilians who were killed by the NATO air campaign. As Charles Simic writes in the *New York Review of Books*: "As for the much-praised 'humanitarian intervention,' no matter what Ms. Albright says, the NATO bombing was a form of collective punishment in which innocent Serbs were made to pay the full price for the sins of their leaders who, of course, remained well protected in their shelters."

Both the Yugoslav army and its leader, Milosevic, ended the war unscathed. The closest NATO came to deposing the Party stalwart was blowing up his empty house. But the air campaign over Serbia, which took out 44 percent of Yugoslavia's industrial capacity, consolidated his power better than any Communist purge. The cost to rebuild Yugoslavia is estimated at \$30 billion, that for a country that is now the poorest in Europe, still embarrassed in the West, and without foreign reserves—thus insuring regional instability for the next generation.

Even by Hollywood standards, so dear to the administration, the Kosovo production was a sequel to *Waterworld*. Never mind that the NATO stealth bombers could no more correct the injustices of the Balkans than could they locate Private Ryan on the outskirts of Pristina, or that our Albanian allies were in league with our enemies—the Islamic fundamentalists—who helped write checks to the KLA. Perhaps one reason the Clinton administration was so eager for the studio rushes over Kosovo was that, if the missiles fell on either Serb militiamen or Moslem fundamentalists, the Pentagon could take credit for a direct hit.

Leaving Albania for Turkish Delights

As striking during the week in Albania was the absence of an American presence. During the war billions were pledged for Balkan reconstruction, especially for front-line states like Albania that contained Serb aggression. The president himself made a cameo in Pristina, to promise the Albanians that the world would not forget their suffering.

Unless the international community has hidden its aid in the trunks of stolen cars, most of the checks must still be in the mail. None of the ministers I met mentioned American largesse, and aid projects like the north-south highway are in the same state of idle disrepair as Hoxha's bunkers, which in their own way sound notes of caution about foreign entanglements.

Waiting for the passengers to board, the pilot threw a stick for the dogs that idle on the tarmac. Before climbing the stairs, I tried to glimpse the heavy pods brought in to keep the Apaches from sinking into an airport pothole. But the army had left no trace of its encampment, and as I stood looking up at the snow-capped mountains, I thought of how the American alliance had paid \$4 billion to inherit the mantle of the Ottomans, who came to measure the state of their empire by its ability to dictate events in the Balkans.

The Ottomans clung to power by violently dividing and conquering their subject nationalities, as in Kosovo, where in the seventeenth century the Turks treated the remaining Serbs as later would NATO's Janissaries, the KLA. Vickers recalls one chapter: "In 1690, unwilling to convert and fearing a massacre if they remained [in Kosovo], the Orthodox Patriarch of Pec, Arsenije IV, led some thirty thousand Serbian families to migrate from Kosova to Hungary." It could easily be the modern story.

In driving the Serbs from Kosovo but leaving the province as part of Yugoslavia, the NATO forces—like some Turkish garrison—suppressed a nationalist uprising on a remote frontier. Just as quickly, a divide-and-rule occupation had resumed and, one suspected, the sultan had retreated to the pleasures of the harem—leaving only a legacy of violence, not the answers to a 600-year-old problem. In the words of Robin Okey, who wrote about the Ottomans but might well have been describing the Clintonians: "The Porte made up in terror for what it lacked in efficiency." ❧





by Mark Steyn

Ars Suburbia

Sam Mendes becomes an instant Hollywood Beauty.

I confess I've always had a soft spot for Sam Mendes, the Oscar-nominated director of the Oscar-nominated *American Beauty*. I make my living saying beastly things about people, but, like most critics, I pine for someone to say something nice about me. And just about the only good reviews I've ever had came six or so years ago at the first night of Mendes's revival of *Cabaret* at the Donmar Warehouse in London. As visitors to the New York production will be aware, there's a clear and present danger of audience participation. But at that long-ago opening night none of us knew about it, until at the top of the second act the Emcee, played by Alan Cumming, came mincing out and beckoned me out on the floor to dance with him. I was gratified by the huge roar of approval from the glittering first-night crowd. "Let me lead," Cumming whispered in my ear. "Forget it!" I hissed, happy to be Fred but drawing the line at Ginger. Several London critics singled me out as one of the highlights of the evening, and, if it takes dancing cheek to cheek with a man with rouged nipples and cutaway buttocks for me to get a decent review, so be it. (By the way, if you're the reader from Doylestown, PA, who accused me of being a homosexual because I enjoyed George Dubya Bush putting his hand on my back, you should probably skip the preceding paragraph. Perhaps I should have alerted you earlier.)

As to the cutaway buttocks, you probably don't remember those from the orig-

inal 1966 Broadway production or Bob Fosse's 1972 film. But, from the kick-off, Mendes's revival is so exhaustively decadent that, though set 80 years ago in the Weimar Republic, it manages to include



a gay sex act which, according to authorities in the field, wasn't invented until 1969. (If you're the chap from Doylestown, skip that sentence, too.) It was an interesting example of the way Mendes's enthusiasms sometimes run away with him. Our last glimpse of the Emcee is as a shaven-head pink-triangled prisoner en route to the gas chamber. In the '66 and '72 versions, *Cabaret*'s characters are mildly bohemian types who get swept up in the turmoil of Hitler's rise to power. In the Mendes version, you're left with the feeling that the decadence of the Weimar Republic led to the rise of Hitler—in other words, that moral abandon inevitably provides a pretext for a backlash. That's a view of history that most on the left strongly object to, and I don't suppose it's the

point Mendes wanted to make, but he wound up making it by accident.

Anyway, Mendes attracted the attention of *Cats* impresario Cameron Mackintosh, who signed him for a splashy West End revival of *Oliver!* It was supposedly a "dark" version of *Oliver!*, if you can imagine such a thing. Actually, there's already a dark version of *Oliver!* It's called *Oliver Twist* by

Charles Dickens. The point about *Oliver!* is that it's the light version of *Oliver Twist*, and at the London Palladium it somehow defied Mendes's efforts to turn it into a Dickensian *Cabaret*. But Steven Spielberg happened to be in town making *Saving Private Ryan*, enjoyed the production, made a mental note of

Mendes's name, and three years later invited him to lunch. While Spielberg was sipping his way through a murky health shake, the cocky young Englishman said: "So how do you do it then, this movie directing thing?" Spielberg told him: "Just trust your instincts and wear comfortable shoes." So here we are on the eve of the Oscars, and, although it's true that you can never really guarantee the results—what with the Academy's strange electoral college and the inclination of its older members to let their wives (trophy or otherwise) and gardeners fill in the ballot—Mendes is as near as we ever get to a comfortable shoo-in.

It's been a meteoric rise. When I first encountered him, he was the chubby fellow dating Caro, the press agent at the Royal Shakespeare Company. Then he

MARK STEYN is theater critic of the New Criterion and movie critic of the Spectator of London.

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