

## The Murdered City

**Mr. Mom; Directed by Stan Dragoti; Written by John Hughes; 20th-Century Fox.**

Detroit was hit by two blows in the recent past, blows from which it will never fully recover. On the one hand, there was the force of the imports. The other fist delivered a hit that was like one of those thrown by a cartoon character that winds up its arm until it can twist no more. This one was long in coming: technological obsolescence. William Blake would have recognized, for example, the Ford Rouge Plant. While Detroit wasn't devastated by the pommeling, there are a number of people there who are bruised to varying shades of black and blue. Auto workers from virtually all levels—from sweepers to middle-level management—find themselves waiting in long lines at Michigan Employment Security Commission offices. Grocery-store lines grow as the formulas necessary for converting food stamps are enacted in suburban locales wherein food stamps were once curious forms of scrip. Not only are the automakers learning to do more with less, but so too are those who once designed and manufactured the vehicles. Hollywood has gone to Detroit. At least all of the license plates in *Mr. Mom* are from Michigan and the characters say that Detroit is the locale. There's even a brief scene that was shot in an auto plant, at a framing line. These indicators notwithstanding, the Detroit in *Mr. Mom* has nothing to do with reality.

When times are tough, comedy is most salutary. While *Mr. Mom* does evoke a few laughs from sight gags, it is essentially a hurtful movie. The story centers on a young automotive engineer—a husband and father of three small children, all nicely housed in Farmington, Troy, or one of the other middle-management suburbs—who finds himself unemployed: no temporary layoff, he's been fired. Writer John Hughes takes the opportu-

nity to insert a feminist line. The character is initially a nice guy who is preoccupied by his work and so benignly puzzled by family affairs. His wife suggests that since she has a college degree and two year's experience with an ad agency, she'll look for work. The nice guy becomes chauvinist pig and bets her that he'll be back in harness before she can dust off her résumé. From that point on, the movie becomes cruel.

Some of the more amusing strips of *Blondie* comics feature Dagwood in a frilly apron. Dagwood is out of his depth in the kitchen. His domestic incompetence is amusing. In *Mr. Mom*, the automotive engineer is a complete idiot who is unable to wash a load of clothes, shop, cook, vacuum the floor, etc. All he seems capable of doing is wandering around with a bottle of beer. If he is supposed to be typical (i.e., even a gross caricature requires some semblance to reality), then it's a wonder that Detroit didn't totally collapse in the days of the Edsel.

Naturally, the wife lands a high-level position at an ad agency and is immediately a hand-holding account executive for the number-one source of billing. Someone should have mentioned to Mr. Hughes that there are hundreds of highly experienced, portfolio-clutching people looking for even entry-level openings in Detroit: when automotive slid, so did the rest, especially ad agencies.

In *Mr. Mom*, the characters live happily ever after. The engineer's ex-boss literally comes in on hands and knees and begs him to return. The wife, who has fended off the advances of her overly libidinous boss (in real life, the ad people tend to be more tired than lusty), decides that she'll continue to work, but elsewhere, and on her own terms. Even this wrap-up is vicious. We can only hope that few of the unemployed in Detroit (or those anywhere else, regardless of their status) have made the mistake of watching a movie that makes *I Love Lucy* reruns look like paragons of sensibility. (SM) □

## The Incertitude of Self

**The Return of Martin Guerre; Directed by Daniel Vigne; Screenplay by Jean-Claude Carrière and Daniel Vigne; a European International Distribution Ltd. release.**

One of the tenets of the semiotics developed by Saussure is that a particular word has significance in a language only in relation to other words in that system. *Dog* means canine whereas *bog*, *cog*, *fog*, etc. don't. After all, there's no ultimate justification for that particular appellation. In a similar sense, specific individuals are, in part, given identity through the context of others. Sam is Sam because he is not Bill or Mary. Of course, there's more to identity than that, more to it than mere naming (at least today: in an

earlier age, names were powerful, potent). One way that we *know* people, as opposed to *knowing* of them, is through shared experience. Everyone *knows* of countless individuals, and in some cases (e.g., celebrities, historical figures), may have a great deal of stored information about them. But that isn't *knowing*. This matter is put into a more concrete form in the story of Martin Guerre, a true story. It seems.

In the mid-16th century, a teenaged Guerre left his wife, son, and farm to the care of his family. Eight years later, he returned. At least it seems to be Martin: he looks like him, seems to *know* people, recalls events. But then his identity is questioned. He must prove himself to be himself. The only way that it can be

done is to appeal to those whom he *knows*, and who, presumably, *know* him. "I am Martin, not Pansette," he essentially claims, "for if I were Pansette, I would not be Martin, yet I can only be Martin in order to *know* what I know and for you to *know* me." Indeed, his wife says that she *knows* that he is Martin. Yet still there is doubt. (This may sound implausible, but in a society like the contemporary one, wherein individuals are defined as bits of data on magnetic disks, it is very possible.) Eventually, Martin is shown, beyond a shadow of a doubt, to

be someone else.

Jean-Claude Carrière and Daniel Vigne portray this difficult situation in a lucid way. There is obviously cerebration behind the film, an activity rarely performed in Hollywood. It is, admittedly, predictable. And it lacks the ambiguity that would have made it a more engrossing film, something on the order of Kurosawa's *Rashomon*. But they decided to work under the constraints of reality. At least I think they did: there is no way of *knowing* (SM) □

## MUSIC

### Power, Passion & Performance

by Robert R. Reilly

Béla Bartók's early music is not well known nor is it often recorded, so it may be surprising for those who have struggled through his string quartets or the dissonance and violence of his *Allegro barbaro* to learn how firmly grounded he was in the 19th century. Sefel Records has released a stunningly recorded digital set of Bartók's albums concentrating on these early works, but also including a superb version of his later *Concerto for Orchestra* (1943). All are conducted by Árpád Joó and played by either the Budapest Symphony Orchestra or the Budapest Philharmonic Orchestra. *Kossuth* (1903) is a tumultuous, Lisztian tone poem depicting Hungary's unsuccessful 1848 War of Independence from Austria. The dramatic scenario for this piece coincided with the enormous impact Richard Strauss's music had on Bartók when he first heard *Also sprach Zarathustra* in 1902; the combination made for a rousing, highly emotive work. This recording (Sefel SEFD 5005) captures the huge orchestral climaxes. Also presented are the later *Four Pieces for*

*Orchestra, Op. 12* (1912), which are considerably more subdued, unquestionably of early-20th-century vintage, but thoroughly accessible. Here the influence of Debussy can be heard, most literally in the intermezzo movement.

*Suite No. 1, Op. 3* (1905) is an extroverted tapestry with alluring sonorities and swirling dance rhythms. It opens with a decidedly English "air," almost Elgarian; in the second movement it turns into a splashy, colorful rendition of what might be called "Nights in the Gardens of Hungary." Bartók later omitted the title "Leaping Dance" from one of the later movements; nevertheless, it adequately conveys the feel of the music. This is the record (SEFD 5006) for those who are afraid of Bartók. It is filled out with *Two Portraits Op. 5* (1907/1908), the first of which is Bartók's musical reminiscence of his passion for a lady. He calls it a "musical portrait of the idealized Stefi Geyer, transcendent and intimate." It is gentle music.

Bartók's *Suite No. 2, Op. 4* (SEFD 5007) coincided with his discovery of Debussy and of original Hungarian folk music, both of which he found in some essentials similar. However, this music sounds less "folksy" than *Suite No. 1*, which he based in part on ersatz folk music. The

first three movements were originally entitled "Serenade," though parts of the "Allegro" have almost symphonic power. They seem to press for a Brucknerian climax, but dissolve instead into gentle impressionistic beauty. The last movement has momentary hints of a Mahler adagio. This is lovely, serene music, but not of the confectionary kind.

*The Concerto for Orchestra* (1943), Bartók's last and most popular orchestral piece, is considered by many to be a masterpiece. It is more than an orchestral showpiece, and is magnificently communicated in this recording (Sefel SEFD 5009), but it is less than profoundly moving.

Leoš Janáček (1854-1928) wrote music with a compelling vision; he is, in Bernard Jacobson's phrase, "essentially a vertical composer." Oddly, it has taken a half-century since his death for it to emerge before a wide audience. Such long neglect would have meant permanent obscurity for music of less conviction and fire. Janáček, like Bartók, began with 19th-century romanticism, but abandoned it for folk-inflected music of national consciousness as he began to model his music on the speech patterns of the Czech language. This hardly seems a recipe for international acclaim. Yet, especially in his later music, there is an appealing strain of searching for the inexpressible. Janáček's music is expressively "human"; there is no abstracted sterility to it, no disembodied sounds of a musical design meeting the autonomous requirements of some system. Janáček, as did Mozart in his own way, anthropomorphizes the orchestra. The instruments become human voices. In Mozart they sing; in Janáček they speak, or attempt to.

Janáček wrote *Idyla for String Orchestra* in 1878, at age 24. While it lacks the idiosyncratic flavor of his later "speech-melody," there are still many conventional pleasures to be had from this melodious idyll in the Dvořákian vein. Paired with it on a Nonesuch digital release (D-79033) is the much later *Mládí*

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