

a werewolf comedy in which Lon Chaney Jr. would've felt at home, while *Kiss of the Spider Woman* is "Cinema" writ large, with William Hurt in his first post-*Big Chill* role (and one for which he received the 1985 Best Actor Award at Cannes); Raul Julia, who has a list of Tony nominations to his credit; and Sonia Braga, acclaimed as *the* Brazilian actress since her performance in *Doña Flor and Her Two Husbands*. Yet there are reasons for the American public's preference for *Teen Wolf* over *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, reasons more fundamental than simple philistinism.

At one point in *Kiss*, the homosexual character played by a henna-haired Hurt says with a voice edged in pique, "I don't explain my movies—that just ruins the emotion." The emotions in *Kiss* itself are so debased that explanation is simply irrelevant. Here we have two prisoners in a South American cell: Hurt as homosexual, Julia as revolutionary. Neither has a compelling sense of identity: Hurt thinks that only females can be "sensitive," so he has become a (wo)man; Julia has given up his upper-class girlfriend to become a small-time Ché because he cannot think his way past leftist slogans.

As the movie unfolds like a colorful but bespotted silk scarf, the two men exchange identities. The climax of the metamorphosis, and of the plot, is sealed with a kiss—footage of a real female spider consuming her mate would have been less depressing. As a result, the homosexual—who has previously lived in a fantasy world of 1940's B-movies spun in his head—leaves the prison determined to act as a revolutionary on behalf of his lover. The macho revolutionary, in turn, turns from Spartan to Sybarite.

For all of its deficiencies, *Teen Wolf* is honestly packaged: it's transparently a flimsy comedy made for the buck, a marketing device for popcorn, tickets, and sound tracks. No one going to see it can expect more. *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, on the other hand, is a fraud. Its producers and distributors represent it as serious art, a work of real substance. But the superficial manipulation of character and the facile repudiation of normative morality make *Kiss* a more disgusting film than any unpretentious entertainment made for adolescents. (GSV) cc

Old Dutch Buggies & New Asian Shrimp Boats

by Roland A. Alum Jr. and Tom Rojas

Witness; Directed by Peter Wier; Story written by William Kelly and Pamela & Earl Wallace; Screenplay by Earl Wallace and William Kelly; Paramount Pictures.

Alamo Bay; Directed by Louis Malle; Written by Alice Arlen; Tri-State Release Studio.

Both *Witness* and *Alamo Bay* explore the tensions that arise when dissimilar cultures meet, when people must meet the demands of an alien land. In *Witness*, a streetwise Philadelphia homicide detective, hardened by a climate of violence and corruption, must hide out among the peaceful Amish of rural Pennsylvania Dutch country. In *Alamo Bay*, a group of Vietnamese refugees flees its totalitarian-ridden nation only to find resentment in the southern Texas village where they had hoped to begin a new life.

On its surface, *Witness* appears to be a cops-and-robbers adventure intertwined with a love story. But it is really something far more haunting. The action focuses on an innocent eight-year-old Amish boy named Samuel (Lukas Hass), who embarks with his young, widowed mother Rachel (Kelly McGillis) in traveling south to visit relatives in Baltimore. However, the two are stranded at the magnificent Philadelphia railroad station, where the boy witnesses a bloody murder in the men's lavatory, unnoticed by the two assassins—although he almost gets caught by them. Harrison Ford (the star of *Indiana Jones* and other Lucas films) plays John Book, the tough policeman-hero assigned to the case. To protect his boyish witness, Book drives mother and son to their Amish farm in Lancaster County, but not before he is wounded in a parking-lot ambush. While recovering from his wounds, he lives for a time among these simple and pacific people who reject all modern technology and live by their own narrow rules. Known as "the English" (a blanket term the

Amish apply to outsiders), Book is accepted primarily because of his industriousness and carpentry skills, his hobby in the city (and Ford's own real-life hobby according to his biographer, A. McKenzie [*The Harrison Ford Story*, 1984]).

Nascent love between Book and the beautiful Rachel can find no overt expression because of the consequences of breaking Amish folk law: ostracism, shunning, and expulsion. And though Samuel comes to see Book as a surrogate father, his grandfather warns him not to trust "the ways of the English."

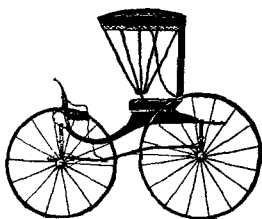
Book finds it especially difficult to adopt the characteristic passivity of the Amish and ends up breaking the nose of a taunting hoodlum. A local merchant protests to the local police that the Amish must not do such things lest the tourists stop coming to see the "quaint" farmers. In the movie's climactic scene, the rough cop demonstrates that he has learned how to vanquish an enemy without modern weaponry, while his gentle hosts learn of evil's reality.

For many viewers, *Witness* will be their first introduction to the Amish. Germanic-Swiss-Dutch in origin, the Old Order Amish migrated to North America during the 18th century because of religious persecution. In this century, they have gained some notoriety because of their rejection of worldliness. As what sociologist Peter Berger would term a counter-modernizing movement, the Amish froze their culture about a century ago: they use neither electricity, telephones, nor motor vehicles. The Amish lead a disciplined life confined to a closed and self-sufficient religious community.

Some (including John Podhoretz in *The American Spectator*) see no idealization of pre-modern culture in *Witness*, no attack on modern America. But such romanticizing of the so-called "primitive" is evident in previous films by Director Peter Wier (e.g., *The Last Wave*, about Australian aborigines), and the Romantic conception of "the noble savage," à la Rousseau, lives on in *Witness*. This conception, as Brigitte Berger has repeatedly noted, has created a sort of reverse ethnocentrism in Western thinking.

On balance, the Amish have had to

pay a price for their doctrines. Their no-tech pacifism made it impossible to protect themselves or the frontier with lethal force. And, as anthropologist Mary Douglas and political scientist Aaron Wildavsky remind us in *Risk and Culture* (University of California Press, 1982), the Amish are forever accusing one another of sinister alliances with the outside world and then expelling those judged guilty (as almost happens to Rachel in *Witness*).



Still, researchers have found that, through time, the Amish and kindred communities (Mennonites and Hutterites) do eventually make accommodations to the surrounding society. Although they do not normally proselytize, converts are reluctantly accepted. John Book declines that option, as will most viewers, but *Witness* is an exciting picture with superb acting. Though the depiction of the Amish seems to be sympathetic, the press has reported complaints from some Amish. How would they know? They are not supposed to watch movies. Will they now threaten boycott of the theaters?

Actually "based on a true story," *Alamo Bay* dramatizes the inter-ethnic conflicts that arise when Vietnamese immigrants settle in a Gulf Texas fishing town. Director Louis Malle, a French "enfant terrible," told *New York Times Sunday Magazine* (April 7, 1985) that the movie shows us the "outsider's need to belong." But it is not clear just who the real "outsiders" are, nor is it clear—at least until the very end—who has been cast as the film's hero.

At the center of the action is Glory (Amy Madigan), a pretty blond who runs a shrimp fishery with her recently widowed father, who does business with a local Vietnam veteran named Shang (Ed Harris). He is having an affair with Glory while trying to support his family through fishing. The pair become estranged when Glory defends the Vietnamese and Shang joins forces with the local Ku Klux

Klan in trying to drive the refugees out of town. The leader of the Vietnamese, Dinh, tries to explain to the native Texans that his countrymen want only the right to work and enjoy their earnings, a right denied them in their native land by the invading communists.

The explanations fall on deaf ears, though, and the Asians are forced to leave town. When Dinh and a few friends later return to help Glory after her sick father dies, hostilities erupt, bringing the movie to a violent climax, typical of the old Western. Indeed, Dinh wears a cowboy hat and boots and is dubbed "the last cowboy left in Texas" by Glory when she hears how as a child he had survived for days alone in the jungle, eating grass, while hiding from the Vietcong who raided his village and killed relatives and neighbors. But in the end, "the last cowboy" needs to be rescued by a woman: Glory saves Dinh's life by shooting Shang.

The difficulties of the Vietnamese refugees depicted in *Alamo Bay* are not atypical. Since the fall of Saigon in 1975, about a quarter-of-a-million Vietnamese have come to the U.S. The largest communities are still found in California's cities, but some Indochinese have moved into coastal fishing areas and elsewhere. It is ironic that antitotalitarian exiles who flee their sovietized lands to find freedom are sometimes regarded with almost as much suspicion and distrust as the foes they left behind. The experiences of Eastern Europeans after World War II and more recently of the Cuban boat people have often paralleled that of the Vietnamese.

This country has gained strength from the successive waves of immigrants escaping political and religious persecution. After all, that is why the Amish—and the Pilgrims—came here, too. But one also needs to understand the uneasiness faced by isolated communities when outsiders with unfamiliar physical features, peculiar customs, and a strange tongue suddenly arrive en masse. The film handles these issues without really taking sides. It deals with the human anguish inherent in the mutual adaptation processes—a pain that may not be avoidable, paradoxically, in a pluralistic, open society such as ours.

Despite innumerable barriers, the Vietnamese—like other new Americans (especially of Asian extraction)—seem to be doing well here by most standards. As the film depicts, their success is largely due to their resiliency and drive, qualities which are, in the long run, compatible with American culture, even though these characteristics may cause frictions initially. "We thought the Vietnamese only wanted to work . . . for us," says a redneck in *Alamo Bay*, "but now they want to buy their own boats!" Entrepreneurship, that quintessentially American characteristic, turns refugees into competitors and fosters new social animosities. And while *Witness* concludes happily, with good people—metropolitan and Amish—prevailing over evil, the ending of *Alamo Bay* is ambivalent and anguished, reminiscent of a Greek tragedy: after killing her former lover, Glory must go to jail. Perhaps one message is that while America has developed a kind of nostalgic affection for its Amish, the difficulties of adjusting to the presence of newcomers is not yet over. cc

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ART

The Man Who Loved Birds

by Shehbaz H. Safrani

"I drew, I looked upon nature only; my days were happy beyond human conception." John James Audubon, who wrote these words, was born 200 years ago in Les Cayes, Haiti. To this day, he remains unrivaled as the greatest painter of birds, with the possible exception of Edward Lear (1812-1888). Unlike Audubon, though, Lear painted birds only for a short part of his career and soon moved on to painting topographical views and to writing some of the best limericks and nonsense rhymes in English literature.

In celebration of the 200th anniversary of Audubon's birth, The New