

doubtlessly occurred during her confrontation with the aforementioned dean of social sciences, a gentleman appropriately named Sawrey. Foolishly, Dean Sawrey permitted this confrontation to take place in Jessica's lecture class before some three hundred students and other Jessica sympathizers, whom she had prepared for Sawrey's appearance. Interrupting the lecture, Sawrey announced that Jessica had been "dehired," that she was no longer authorized to teach, that a qualified replacement would be found, and so forth. And the students, of course, went berserk. They marched around the lecture hall carrying signs reading "We Want Jessica, Not Fingerprints." When the dean tried to speak, he was drowned out by cries of "Jessica! Jessica! We Want Jessica!" and Jessica, clearly the "gallant little Englishwoman" fighting the fascist bully, was able to raise her hand for silence and declare: "They'll have to pick me up bodily and toss me out to keep me from teaching!" Jessica's speech was followed by more wild cheering and by Dean Sawrey scuttling off the stage.

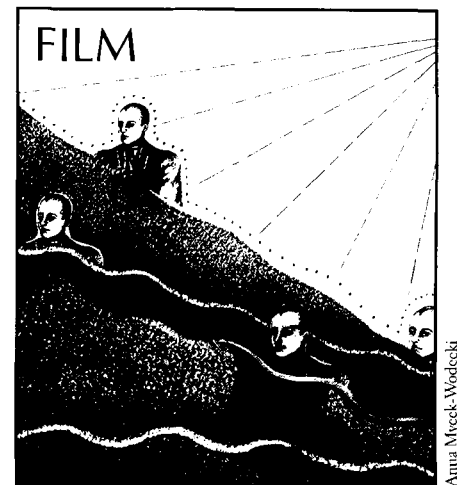
From the time of the Sawrey confrontation it was clear to many veteran press watchers that Jessica had won not only the battle but the war, and Judge Ingram's decision—to return the sealed envelope of fingerprints to Jessica—came as rather an anticlimax.

At the end of the semester, Jessica gave a party at the San Jose State Newman Center to celebrate her victory and her "short happy life as a Distinguished Professor." Women in pale yellow kimonos and men in pink velvet bell-bottoms wandered about the hall. Bettina

Aptheker was there, a short woman whose enormous bottom looked even more so in red tight pants, Shana Alexander was there in granny garb, as was Maya Angelou in African headdress. The hall was hot and clouded with sweet smoke. On stage, a female folk singer with guitar and knee-length blond hair howled something about "love and baby. The ex-convicts were there: Willy the Artist; Patty the Obscene; and Earl of Purple Gang fame.

The high point of the party, Jessica promised in her invitation, would be a conga line made up of visiting speakers from her classes: funeral directors from the Lima Family Funeral Home of San Jose; Dean Sawrey; various ex-convicts; Bettina Aptheker; Maya Angelou; Paul Du Feu; Germaine Greer and others. Because the funeral directors and Dean Sawrey did not show up, however, the conga line never materialized. Jessica, presiding over a long table covered with jugs of warm white wine, handed out boutonnieres made of pieces of Kleenex on which Jessica had put her lip prints. Asked what her plans were, Jessica said she was going on a six-month European vacation during which she would write an exposé of San Jose State. About the sealed envelope containing her fingerprints, she said: "I have decided, after all, to turn the fingerprints over to San Jose State. I shall," she declared, "cremate the dear little things and present them in a suitable funeral urn to the college board of trustees."

James P. Degnan writes from Aptos, California.



Christmastime in Hollywood

by David R. Slavitt

Batman Returns

Produced by Denise di Novi and Tim Burton; Directed by Tim Burton; Screenplay by Daniel Waters; Released by Warner Brothers

Monster in a Box

Produced by Jon Blair and Renee Shafransky; Directed by Nick Broomfield; Written and Performed by Spalding Gray; Released by Fine Line Features

Not only had I not planned to see *Batman Returns*, I had made a very definite promise to myself not to see it. The earlier *Batman* had been boring and incoherent, a product from and for another culture or maybe even another species. Aside from Jack Nicholson's campy bravura, there had been almost nothing to look at. Once burned, twice careful. These plans of mine were foiled, of course—but not by the strenuous promotions and tie-ins (the film grossed \$100 million dollars in only 11 days, which would be a record—except that *Batman* hit that mark in only 10 days). What changed my mind was a piece on the op-ed page of the *New York Times* by a couple of seniors at Columbia, Rebecca Roiphe and Daniel Cooper, an essay entitled "Batman and the Jewish Question."

A joke? On the contrary. Their first paragraph reads: "Batman's new adver-

LET US KNOW BEFORE YOU GO !

To assure uninterrupted delivery of CHRONICLES please notify us in advance. Send change of address on this form with the mailing label from your latest issue of CHRONICLES to:

Subscription Department, CHRONICLES, P. O. Box 800, Mount Morris, Illinois 61054

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____

STATE _____

ZIP _____

sary, the Penguin, played by Danny DeVito in 'Batman Returns,' is not just a deformed man, half-human, half-Arctic beast. He is a Jew, down to his hooked nose, pale face and lust for herring. No, Mr. DeVito is not Jewish, but that's just it: Man in penguin costume, Christian in Jew face."

So, reluctantly, skeptically, and with a degree of apprehension that had nothing to do with the film, I betook myself to my local cinema—where, not long ago, some frustrated swain pulled a piece on his companion of the evening, who was evidently resisting his more pacific advances and blandishments, shot her in the midsection, nicked her spine, and paralyzed her for life. This is that theater of cruelty Artaud envisioned; here the oppressed and the deprived come to cheer at the mayhem they have imagined, the havoc and devastation they have dreamed of—which probably will not restore equity and justice but may be, at least for a while, diverting.

Still, I was dubious about the prospects of seeing an old-fashioned 1930's Jew-baiting movie. CUNY Professor Leonard Jeffries may not be entirely sane in his conviction that a conspiracy of Jews and Italians out in Hollywood is responsible for the unflattering portrayal of black people in most American movies. But it is harder to believe that an industry from which Jews are not significantly excluded is going to base a surefire summer hit on the old blood libel. (Mendel Beiliss, thou shouldst be living at this hour!) But these Columbia kids are not crazy. If anything, their report is cautious, modest, and generally understated.

The movie makes no sense whatever, and one is therefore forced to guess at what the point of it might be. It is even a more dismal narrative muddle than the first film, and it is visually uninteresting—mostly murky, dark, and, well, German expressionist. So we are inevitably more receptive to hints and clues than we would be if there were some surface story line to keep our minds minimally occupied. It is clear that Christianity is the film's subject: the action is set around Christmastime, and the lighting of the tree is a significant piece of business that the bad guys are trying either to prevent or to expropriate. The last line of dialogue is that of Batman himself, responding to his manservant's wishes for a Merry Christmas with a hope for "peace on earth and

goodwill towards men . . . and women."

The Penguin, on the other hand, is . . . at least as Jewish as Roiphe and Cooper claim. His penguinishness is a clear and deliberate rejection of the debonair figure that Burgess Meredith used to cut in the television series. He waves away that cigarette holder, and we see him instead in the most unflattering way possible, with a new coiffure of greasy hair hanging down in the back (Fagin's do), and he cavorts a lot in his long johns. Gross and grubby, his characteristic beaky nose is no longer the benign Pinocchio cylindrical appendage but a conventional caricature of the Semitic schnozz, which is photographed from a low angle to exaggerate it and make it even more grotesque. The discussion of what is or is not human (nonhuman? subhuman!) is the film's central business. Batman and the Catwoman have their animal natures, too, but they triumph over them or keep them under control. The trouble with the Penguin is that his bestiality runs riot and that he outwardly proclaims it: "I am not a human being! I am an animal!" Which is the fundamental basis of all bigotry—that *they* are not like *us* and in fact are not even human. The Penguin is angry at his parents for having made him what he is and for then betraying him. In the film's opening sequence he is put into a Moses-like cradle and thrown into a frozen river, which becomes a sewer that empties improbably enough into the penguin house of the local zoo. His wicked polluting coconspirator is Max Shreck, played by Christopher Walken. Shreck owns, among other things, a department store—like Altman's? Or Macy's? And his name, which means "fear" in German, is the name of the actor who played the vampire in F. W. Murnau's 1922 silent film, *Nosferatu*—a not too subtle suggestion of blood-sucking.

The Wagnerian references in Danny Elfman's music and in the rubber duck that is the Penguin's preferred mode of transportation and, as Roiphe and Cooper point out, a version of the *Schwan der Scheldt* from *Lohengrin*, can't be inadvertent. The Penguin insists on a revenge that will not be limited to first-born sons but will be more general and (ha-ha!) liberal and include all children, without limitation of gender or birth order. At the film's climax, a bunch of penguins dive into the water at his bidding, which would be ludicrous—attack-penguins?—except that the reference is

clearly to the swarms of rats in the old Nazi propaganda films. The target of their attack, so far as it can be determined, is not only children but Christmas. While I don't remember this from the film—I was numb by this point—the official DC Comic adaptation ("Take The Movie Home!") shows the Penguin and his avian minions singing "Silent night, violent night, all is shrill, all is blight . . ." so that we cannot mistake the fact that their target is Christianity and, indeed, Christ himself.

Dismayed yet convinced, I am trying to figure out what any of this may mean. Theatergoers mostly didn't get it—I think. Or rather I hope. Until now, they have been kept relatively calm with the antics of a Schwarzenegger, a Willis, or a Mel Gibson and a Danny Glover team, showing up the deficiencies in intellect and courage of recognized authorities and bureaucrats who have annoyed them in their welfare offices, schools, housing projects, parole offices, and prisons. Those fantasy exercises allowed audiences to suppose that none of their troubles were their own fault, but rather the result of the system itself. The message of *Batman Returns* is that all our ills arise from the work of some small but evil bunch of rich and powerful people who are different from us—not quite human, beasts, vermin—and are therefore after blood, wanting to kill our children and our God.

I remember, at a press screening of *Exodus*, hearing what was probably the best one-liner in the history of movie criticism. As we were coming out of the theater, somebody behind me (I preferred not knowing who this smart-aleck was and not having to envy him) said, "This movie will set the Jews back four hours." I hope it's no worse than that this time.

Meanwhile, on a cheerier front, I am delighted to report that *Monster in a Box* is a glorious romp. What we have here is nothing spectacular in conventional movie terms. There's a man seated at a table, and he's talking. We see his hands and his face, and the table and the microphone and the glass of water. Also on this table is a 1900-page eponymous monster, the novel he has been working on for years and years. This novel is actually out and available, *Impossible Vacation*, but the movie is by no means a promotion for the book, except in the most roundabout way. Those of us who are interested in Spalding Gray's curi-

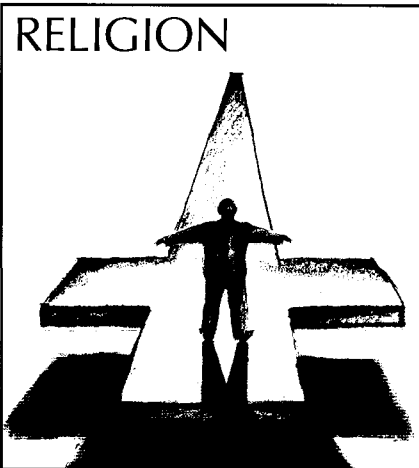
ous narrative gifts are likely to follow up the movie with at least a look at the pages, which are also pretty good and which also depend on the almost incantatory magic of repetition and variation, set-ups and pay-offs, the rhythm of theme and riff, departure and return. It is a brilliant piece of talking, better by far than *My Dinner With André*, better than Garrison Keillor's more self-conscious performances that tended too often to deteriorate into either sentimentality or mere shtick. Richard Pryor at his best was able to manage something like these extended turns, but he was angrier and more stand-up comic in tradition and intention. Gray is not out for laughs, although he gets them often enough and is even able to do a quick joke, as when he is describing his first encounter with the Sovetskaia Hotel and its endless vistas of red carpeted hallways. ("It's Eloise goes to Moscow!") What matters much more is the wry, self-deprecating, mildly but always engagingly agonized personality that binds together these bizarre and disparate pieces of culture and experience into something that seems very much like a life. And what else is there for movies or books or any other kind of narrative art

to convey?

Gray is almost naked. He just sits there and talks. A couple of times he stands up. There is a musical score coming in from time to time, and there are occasional sound effects. Changes in camera angles and cuts provide a kind of punctuation so that he can do two different sides of a conversation and make clear which person is talking. But mostly it's just him, talking. He is, for instance, at a writers' colony at McDowell, up in New Hampshire, in one of those secluded cabins, and he says, "I write, I walk, and I drink, and I eat, and I walk, and I write, and I write, and I walk, and I drink, and I drink . . ." and he is getting arthritis in his writing hand, and he is losing sight in his left eye, and with a book like this, which is about his mother and is, after all, Oedipal, he thinks, "There goes the first eye."

This is the second of his brilliant *tours de force*. The first was *Swimming to Cambodia*, which was also a performance piece first and then a film. This time, he has meetings with various producers and agents, travels to Central America for Columbia Pictures, and goes to the Mark Taper Forum on an NEA grant to do theatrical interviews with people from Los Angeles who are not in the movie business—such people being difficult to find out there. But the adventure is never as important as the adventurer, which is what Gray counts on. As his alter ego protagonist in the novel explains, "We all had fun as our wonderful summers blended together in Sakonnet, although I could never lie on the beach again without thinking of Bali. Then after a while I just accepted that as part of my life, accepted that forever I would always be a little bit in the place that I was not, a little bit in my body and a lot in my imagination." When he calls this work a huge "solipsistic, narcissistic, self-indulgent pile of poop," he is, obviously, relying on us to disagree with him. And even though we know that we're being snookered, we know that he knows this too, and is apologizing for it. Yet we're all having far too good a time to do anything but what he is counting on. Having been so richly entertained for so long—there isn't a dull patch in this wonderful film—it's the very least we can do.

David R. Slavitt is a poet and novelist living in Philadelphia.



Anna Mycek-Wodecki

Religion as a Social System

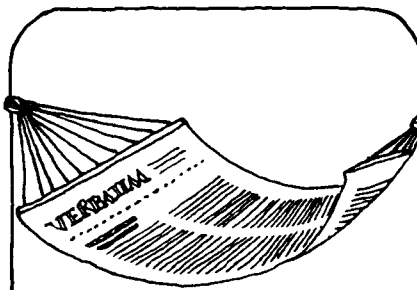
by Jacob Neusner

To study any vital religion is to address, as a matter of hypothesis, a striking example of how people explain to themselves who they are as a social entity. Religion as a powerful force in human culture is realized in society, not only or even mainly in theology. Religions form social entities—churches, peoples, "holy nations," monasteries, or communities—that, in the concrete, constitute the "us," as against the "nations" or the "them"; and they carefully explain, in deeds and in words, who that "us" is—every day. To see religion in this way is to take religion seriously as a means of realizing a specific conception of the world.

But how do we describe, analyze, and interpret a religion, and how do we relate the contents of a religion to its context? These issues of method are worked out through the reading of texts and, I maintain, through the serious analysis of the particularity and specificity of texts.

Religion may represent itself as tradition, meaning the increment of the ages. It may also come forth as a cogent statement, as a well-crafted set of compelling answers to urgent questions. A religious tradition comprises whatever the received sedimentary process has handed on, whereas a religious system addresses in orderly fashion a world view, a way of life, and a defined social entity. Each process of thought obeys its own rules.

For example, the pentateuchal system



... relaxing

If you love words, you'll love
VERBATIM,
The Language Quarterly.
Each interesting issue contains
informative, entertaining articles,
incisive book reviews, lively
correspondence, amusing short
bits, and puzzling word games.

Subscribe now to ensure you receive the
Diamond Jubilee Issue (Winter 1993).
\$16.50 a year

VERBATIM P.O. BOX 78008CR
INDNPLS, IN 46278

The Language Quarterly
(MC/VISA ONLY): 800-999-2266, OPR. 6