

TELEVISION

Why so few independent feature films?

"Everyone assumes that independent filmmakers like us have it easy in the U.S. The truth is, it's probably harder to make a film that makes a serious statement and get it distributed here than anywhere in the world."

Eugene Corr and Steve Wax, co-directors of *Over-Under, Sideways-Down*, (reviewed in *IN THESE TIMES*, Nov. 28) were discussing the reception of their film at the recent Chicago International Film Festival.

Chicago critics praised it in print. There were several jury members who voted it the festival's best feature. But it won no awards. There was, it is rumored, more enthusiasm within the jury for encouraging socialist filmmakers "who are being hassled by their governments."

"They ought to be encouraged, of course," said Wax. "But I don't think most people understand what an independent filmmaker is up against in the U.S. Just consider the fact that ours was the only American film in competition in this festival. In the country where motion pictures really took off!"

Despite Hollywood's past glory, Corr does not believe there is a tradition of independent, socially-conscious filmmaking in this country. "I really don't understand why there isn't. There should be sufficient talent and sufficient wealth—even though it costs a lot to capitalize a film."

The major roadblock, as both men see it, is the lack of a distribution network to get films like *Over-Under, Sideways-Down* to the audience for which they are intended.

How to get the film out of the can.

The story of *Over-Under* is that of a factory worker and his wife: his problems on the assembly line in a steel plant; his dream of escaping to the life of a professional baseball player; the strain produced on the marriage by the wife's decision to get a job.

Clearly there is a big potential audience for a film in which working class Americans can see their own experience treated seriously and dramatically. Such films are being made today. (Wax named four others beside his own, all nearly ready for release.) The trick



is to get them into theaters in the neighborhoods where most Americans go for entertainment.

One possibility is to book as second feature to one of the "exploitation" films commonly shown in drive-ins. (*ITT*, July 13, p. 22.) Another is to show it in the "art houses" that concentrate on European features, but do sometimes show independently produced American films. (*Harlan County, U.S.A.* is currently being distributed in this kind of house by Cinema V.)

"But at this point," Wax told *IN THESE TIMES*, "the art houses have their pick of the best features from all over the world. They can fill their house at a high admission price. So why should they fool around with us?"

The result of this situation is that independent filmmakers frequently assume the burden of distributing their own product—"four walling," as it is called. It is a killing burden.

"You put in the work of a lifetime making the film and then

you have to spend the same amount of effort distributing it." Wax feels "it's not good for any human being to have to spend that many years on any single project."

The collective solution.

What has lightened the burden for Wax and Corr—at least to a degree—is their participation in Cine Manifest, a collective dedicated to the making of independent feature films.

It began in 1972, when 20 people—all of whom were working in some aspect of commercial filmmaking—got together in an old adobe house near San Francisco to discuss ways of producing full-length features. There were three scripts already in work by various members of the group, and others, including *Over-Under*, under discussion.

On Jan. 1, 1973, Cine Manifest actually came into being when seven of the original 20 began to deposit what each of them earned in a common bank account.

"It mounted up pretty quickly

because at that point we were all working, some of us at highly paid jobs," Wax recalls. Each member of the collective drew a basic salary of \$200 a month, plus rent, plus extras for those who had dependents and in certain cases, car expenses. "It was a rather complicated formula, but it worked."

What the collective provided, besides financial support, was a sounding-board for scripts-in-progress. It was at this stage that Corr found the method most helpful. ("When it worked it was wonderful; when it didn't, it was pretty dreadful.")

When a script was finished, it was sent out to contacts who might help in raising funds for production. In the case of *Over-Under*, the project was submitted to the Visions series at PBS. Although this is primarily designed to encourage higher quality TV features, a deal was made whereby Cine Manifest retained the right to distribute the film after its TV airing and Visions (PBS) provided most of the funding

(\$225,000 of a budget of \$300,000).

Once in actual production, Corr found the collective approach to filmmaking difficult. "Whatever balance between individual creativity and collective in-put had worked so well in the writing stage was gone."

Asked how decisions were made "collectively" during production, Corr recalled "the best decisions the collective made were to delegate certain responsibilities. When that happened and people carried out the responsibility, it worked well."

He is, nevertheless, not sure he wants to make another film in a collective set-up. Wax, who has a script of his own ready to shoot, is more committed to staying with Cine Manifest.

Meanwhile, both men are committed to getting *Over-Under, Sideways-Down* out of the can and on to the screen, even if they have to four-wall it.

—Janet Stevenson

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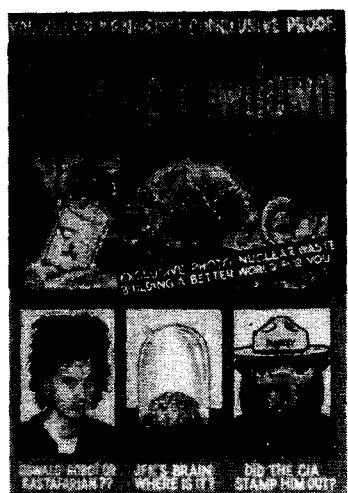
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FILM

Turning Point another view of love v. career

THE TURNING POINT

Directed by Herbert Ross
Written by Arthur Laurents
20th-Century Fox, Rated PG

The Turning Point is a film in the mold of the old-fashioned "tear-jerkers" melodramas, which takes the lives of three women and reduces them to the dichotomy of love (read "family") vs. career.

Anne Bancroft plays Emma, the aging but still kicking prima ballerina of the American Ballet Theater, Shirley MacLaine is Dee Dee, her old friend and one-time rival, who gave up a promising career for marriage; and Leslie Browne is Dee Dee's eldest offspring, a sweet-faced budding ballerina who gets a crack at the big time when Godmother Emma takes her under her tutu and into the company.

Instead of supporting the usual moral—that love is the wiser choice. *The Turning Point* focuses mainly on Dee Dee's yearning for the glamorous life that she can now participate in only as a ticket-holder. Her home and family are shown as comfortable but humdrum. Old ballet photos surround her like mocking ghosts from the past as she goes about the house stuffing dirty laundry in the hamper and carrying out other mundane activities.

When the ABT comes to Oklahoma and the two women are reunited after a split of many years, Dee Dee finds herself blaming Emma for having encouraged her to settle down, advice that landed her in a suburban dancing school and Emma on center-stage at the Met.

But Emma's life is not all standing ovations either. The hints that she's getting too old for her roles are dropping around her like flies. Although in lucid moments she

realizes that her retirement from the stage is overdue, Emma fights furiously against choreographers and managers and the younger dancers who threaten her sole reason for being. Her dull, long-standing affair with a married man has turned sour, and she seems destined to become a bitter, lonely person.

Emilia, the dancing daughter, goes to New York to study and finds herself at the same crossroads that led her mother and godmother down different, but equally frustrating paths. She survives a hurtful romantic entanglement with the male star of the company (Mikhail Baryshnikov) and emerges with renewed dedication to her career.

All this takes place under the implied assumption that life is a case of either/or. The generations change, but the choices remain the same...but why should they?

Anne Bancroft and Shirley MacLaine are perfectly matched opposites, both giving performances that are highly polished, yet natural (although MacLaine is required to play too many scenes with tears brimming.)

There is a lot of ballet photography, some clumsy, some excellent, but all of it entertaining. Browne and Baryshnikov won't be winning any Oscars for their acting debuts, but what they lack in dramatic prowess they make up for in their dance sequences. Baryshnikov in particular displays some of the flashy legwork for which he is deservedly famous.

Herbert Ross's direction is unhurried, with careful attention to detail. The behind-the-scenes glimpses of backstage life are real enough, and one shot of a full performance taking place while the extras stand just out of audience



Shirley MacLaine (as Dee Dee) and Anne Bancroft (as Emma)—two old friends who meet again and review the decision that made Emma a prima ballerina and Dee Dee a humdrum housewife.

view in the wings captures simultaneously the magical aspects of the ballet as well as its realistic, hard-working side. Arthur Laurent's screenplay fits his leading ladies like a leotard. Their angry exchanges during an esca-

lating fight scene are a particularly convincing blend of phony politeness and out-and-out bitching.

Although the basic point of a woman's Big Choice In Life may be an arguable one, in this case a faulty premise does not necessar-

ily lead to a wrong conclusion. *The Turning Point* is the worthy result of a lot of right choices.

—P. Hertel

P. Hertel reviews films and records regularly for IN THESE TIMES.

Another view of the American Ballet Theater

The Turning Point is something of a dance milestone.

The publicity hype (a marketing package that includes records, tapes, and a Signet paperback) and long lines outside movie theaters point to an important aspect of today's dance explosion: the fact that dance, and particularly ballet, has become big business. Supported through its lean years by public funds and matching grants, the American Ballet Theater, *The Turning Point's* "company," epitomizes what has become a disturbing national trend. The commercialization of dance institutions like ABT is reflected in increasing reliance on corporate funding and the systematic promotion of a foreign star system to insure high box office receipts.

Founded under the direction of heriess Lucia Chase (who now holds undisputed sway over ABT policy), Ballet Theater gave its first performance on Jan. 11, 1940. The aim was to build up a repertory of classics and specially commissioned American works.

In its early years the company was a showcase of native choreo-

graphic talent with a repertory that included pioneering works by Agnes de Mille, Jerome Robbins, and Michael Kidd. Equally important, Ballet Theater nurtured a generation of American dancers to rival the glamor and technique of the Europeans.

Thirty-seven years later, little is left of ABT's high ideals.

The film's opening credits roll over ABT's production of *La Bayadere* (an 1877 Russian classic recently restaged by Natalia Makarova who defected to ABT from Leningrad's Kirov Ballet in 1970). "Tradition" is the byword here, defined in the most conservative terms possible—*Giselle*, *Swan Lake*, *Le Corsaire*, and *Don Quixote*—all dating from before 1900 and showpieces of the Russian Imperial Ballet. The only American choreographer represented is Alvin Ailey.

Casting in the film reflects ABT policy, featuring foreign stars at the expense of American talent. British ballerina Antoinette Sibley performs *Giselle* and the film's "gala program" features Richard Cragun and Marcia Haydee imported from the Stuttgart Ballet.

This is not to disparage these great artists or the film's star, Mikhail Baryshnikov, indisputably one of the world's greatest dancers. But there is no reason why ABT's homegrown dancers could not have performed these cameo roles.

One result of the foreign star system has been increasing restiveness in the ABT ranks. California-born Cynthia Gregory, the company's leading American ballerina and an international star in her own right, has publicly voiced discontent with the policy.

Many dancers of soloist rank left promising careers in regional companies to join ABT. Now, as they reach the age of 30, they find themselves dancing the same roles season after season while promotion to the front ranks eludes them.

Finally, one can only wonder at the rubric "American" for a company where not a single black dancer is to be found. As Arthur Mitchell's Dance Theater of Harlem has conclusively proved, black dancers can not only do ballet, but can do it extremely well.

The Turning Point refers to cut-throat competition between dan-

cers in their drive to stardom. What it neglects to mention are the financial considerations that pressure management into promoting one particular dancer over another.

Take Leslie Browne.

The role she plays in the film was originally given to Gelsey Kirkland, one of ABT's leading dancers. During the course of the filming, Kirkland was dropped from the cast (for reasons that ranged from an untimely sunburn to unexpected loss of weight) and was replaced by Browne, who was at the same time taken into the company with the rank of soloist.

Although a dancer of promise, Browne is no prodigy. She is, however, the godchild of Nora Kaye, one of the Ballet Theater's founding members and the film's executive producer, since appointed associate artistic director of the company.

Leslie Browne's entry into the company is said to be related to infusions of West Coast money into ABT coffers. It may also be that the prominence of Russian defectors makes the company ap-

pealing to big-money contributors as interested in drawing attention to dissidence abroad as in promoting the arts at home.

ABT has found a permanent home in New York at the Metropolitan Opera House and has been designated the Kennedy Center's company in residence. Its productions of *Giselle* and *Swan Lake* (starring Makarova and Baryshnikov) have been broadcast nationally over PBS. The company not only enjoys the blessings of the establishment, but as mounting ticket prices indicate, it has become chic entertainment for the upper classes. Student rush tickets and dance passes have been discontinued, and with the rise in audience age and income has come an increasingly conservative repertory.

The Turning Point glorifies ballet at its glamorous and fashionable best. ABT's recent history illustrates the dangers of mortgaging a company's future to big-money patrons.

—Lynn Garafola

Lynn Garafola reviews films and dance regularly for IN THESE TIMES.