

ART «» ENTERTAINMENT

FILM



Another lovely war?

DAMNATION ALLEY

Screenplay by Alan Sharp and Lukas Heller

Directed by Jack Smight

Starring Jan-Michael Vincent,

George Peppard, Dominique

Sanda and Paul Winfield

20th Century-Fox, Rated PG

Can a film with killer cockroaches be all bad? Yes, it can. And it can make World War III and attendant nuclear holocaust look like a minor inconvenience.

As a result of a stock-footage Armageddon, the earth gets knocked off its axis and peculiar things happen to the weather. The sky lights up with aurora borealis effects. There are giant scorpions to contend with, the aforementioned killer cockroaches, and a gang of dim-witted troglodytes with designs on Dominique Sanda (on her way to 1900).

A little band of survivors (Jan-Michael Vincent, George Peppard, Paul Winfield and Sanda) unfazed by any of these deterrents, are wending their way to Albany. (Why Albany? Because a dim radio signal emanates from there, indicating that there may be other survivors.) They are driving a recreational vehicle that is 35 feet long and weighs 21,800 pounds and is the best actor in the film.

(The special effects also star, as does a new process—Sound 360—that for the first time makes it possible to experience the thrill of atomic war, which it puts on a planc with *Rollercoaster*.)

Jan-Michael Vincent is probably the last actor in the world who can say "gosh-dang" with any sort of conviction. In a press hand-out provided by 20th Century-Fox, Vincent is quoted as saying that he "will not condone negativity in scripts or in life. For me, it has to be positive." It takes considerable ingenuousness to fail to note the negativity inherent in nuclear war.

Not that optimism among nuclear survivors is objectionable. (It is merely improbable.) What is objectionable is the premise of

this film: i.e., with a little pluck and a little luck, we'll bring this recreational vehicle into Albany on a wing and a prayer—to hell with radiation and killer cockroaches! All that's required is a little Yankee ingenuity.

Damnation Alley makes you think, "Gee, World War III doesn't look so terrible." Vincent's hair is always carefully blow-dried; Sanda appears in an oriental peignoir that looks as though she picked it up yesterday at Saks; there's plenty of booze and cigarettes and copies of *Playboy* magazine. (And this is all supposed to take place years after the war, when supplies,

however ample, might be assumed to have given out.) And above all, those aurora borealis effects are kinda pretty.

Vincent, Sanda and Peppard do get to Albany, of course, and the scene they find there is as tranquil as the set of *Ozzie and Harriet*. It's all too upbeat. Almost giddy.

It's pointless to go on itemizing the offenses of this silly movie. Director Jack Smight (*Airport 1975*) couldn't have saved it if Helen Hayes had played one of the scorpions. —Barry Brennan
Barry Brennan is a film critic who writes regularly for the Santa Monica Evening Outlook.

Records

Sakolsky's Top Ten Jazz Records of 1977

New Releases

Ornette Coleman. *Dancing in Your Head*. (Horizon A&M, SP 722). Harmelodic magic.

Sam Rivers and Dave Holland. *Sam Rivers/Dave Holland, Vol. 2*. (Improvising Artists, Inc. IAI 373.848). The gospel of SAM and Dave according to Paul (Bley, that is).

Various Artists. *Wildflowers 1: NYC Loft Jazz Sessions*. (Douglas NBIP 7045). Studio Rivbea, circa 1976, including a rare live recording of AIR (with Henry Threadgill, Steve McCall and Fred Hopkins).

Julius Hemphill. *Blue Boye*. (Mbari MPC 1000X—2-record set). An ambitious solo album and an instant "roots" classic. Dexter Gordon. *Homecoming*. (Columbia PG 3465W—2-record set). Not the best Dexter on wax (see *Go*, Blue Note 84112 for that), but an historic album—welcome back!

Reissues/Previously Unissued

Charlie Parker/Lester Young, et al. *Jazz at the Philharmonic: Bird and Pres' 46 Concerts*. (Verve VE 2-2518—2-record set). First there was Bean, then Pres and then Bird—hear all three on this fine set—thank you, Norman.

John Coltrane. *The Other Village Vanguard Tapes*. (Impulse AS 9325—2-record set). Trane + Dolphy = Untitled Originals.

John Coltrane. *Afro Blue/Impressions*. (Pablo 2620 101—2-record set). "The" quartet of the '60s, live in Europe—"I Want to Talk About You" offers us Trane in one of his most searching outings.

Joseph Jarman. *Song Ford*. (Delmark DS-410). Great black music, featuring a rare studio date by AACM guru Fred Anderson.

Various Artists. *Jazz Women: A Feminist Retrospective*. (Stash ST 109—2-record set). The "jazzman" is a woman—guitarist Mary Osborne says it all on "I Can Do Anything Better Than You Can."

Ron Sakolsky reviews jazz regularly for *IN THESE TIMES*.

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Photos by Ken Firestone

Do-It-Yourself Messiah

Chicago is where the action is for those who want to sing Handel's oratorio, *The Messiah*, instead of listening to other people do it. And there were enough of them to fill Orchestra Hall (home of Solti's Chicago Symphony) to the uppermost galleries on the night of Dec. 14.

On the podium was Margaret Hillis, who conducted last year's inaugural Do-It-Yourself *Messiah* and who became front-page news last month when she substituted for Solti at the last moment in a New York performance of Mahler's choral symphony. Greeting the 2,500 participants Wednesday night, Hillis said, "I hope you have all had as challenging a year as I have since we were last together here. But believe me, Mahler's Eighth was nothing compared to this."

The stage behind her was filled with a volunteer orchestra, full strength, with all the required trumpets, a violin section that included gray-haired veterans and one youngster who never played out of the first position, a professional harpsichordist and seven double basses. They had never rehearsed together until Hillis took them on three hours before concert time.

By then there was such a press of ticket-holders (tickets were free but had to be obtained by writing

in), that ushers gave up trying to check on the other entrance requirement—that one bring one's own score. The huge auditorium was divided roughly into sections, and the crowd arranged itself more or less accordingly.

Hillis asked for a showing of hands on those who had not attended last year's performance. When a majority of hands went up, she proposed a "rehearsal." "Just remember that sound travels slowly," she said. "Watch the baton; don't wait till you hear your entrance—especially you way up there at the top. By the time you hear it, you'll be three beats late."

With that, she plunged into the first chorus, which everyone present seemed to know. After that it was, "Take it from the top."

Four professional soloists, all of whom had sung in the 1976 concert, were there in formal attire, as was Hillis and most of the orchestra. For the rest of the audience, anything went—in costume and/or competence. There were moments when things got so ragged that Hillis stopped and tried again. It was, as she announced at the start, not so much a performance as a celebration.

The notion of a community celebration of *The Messiah* at Christmas time is not original with businessman Al Booth, who

is responsible for the Chicago happening: Booth lived for years in London and attended the annual sing-along in Albert Hall. What is unique to Chicago is that there is no entrance fee. "They've done it in New York for years," Booth says, "but they charge \$5 or \$6. Our idea was to let anyone—everyone—who cares about this music come and participate."

Everyone who cares about this music turns out to be an extraordinary cross-section of the community—every age, national origin, economic, social and educational background, every religious persuasion or lack of one. There is probably no other major musical work that could draw so heterogeneous a following—and not only for a one-shot at Orchestra Hall, but for four other celebrations in the Chicago area.

Two days later, Hillis conducted a Do-It-Yourself *Messiah* in Elgin, Ill., with that city's symphony orchestra. There was another in near-by Peoria under the sponsorship of the Illinois Bach society. A chamber choir and a community church in Chicago's northern suburbs opened their doors to all comers, with soloists, orchestral, organ and harpsichord accompaniment, to sing all or at least most of Handel's much-handled but still exhilarating *Messiah*.



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BOOKS

Straight talk about Italian Communism

THE ITALIAN ROAD TO SOCIALISM

An interview by Eric Hobsbawm with Giorgio Napolitano
Lawrence Hill (Westport, Ct.),
\$3.95 paper, \$6.50 cloth

The Italian Communist party was launched in 1921. In the following year the fascists staged their "march on Rome" and Mussolini was installed as premier. From 1922 until the end of World War II in 1945, the CP struggled to overthrow the fascist regime.

In its infancy, the party was compelled to grapple with very mature questions. Why did the Italian working class suffer such a catastrophic defeat? Why did fascism triumph? These questions reflected a painful experience: i.e., a profound crisis does not necessarily presage socialist revolution; it can also lead to the victory of fascism. On a global scale this lesson made its most traumatic impact with Hitler's conquest in 1933, but the Italians had a ten-year headstart.

One cannot begin to comprehend Italian communism without taking these and other historic factors into account. The first merit of Hobsbawm's interview with Napolitano (a member of the Italian CP's Secretariat) is its elucidation of the historic background and experience that helped make Italian communism what it is. Companion merits are the pertinent elaborations of the contemporary Italian and world contexts, of certain internal dynamics in the Italian CP's development, and of key Gramscian concepts that inform the party's theory and practice. Finally, there is the specific examination of the party's program and tactics.

The sum of all this is the most lucid and most competent exposition available of what Italian communism is all about. Because Hobsbawm is so keen and know-

ledgeable, and because Napolitano does not dispense official pronouncements and is not oracular or pompous, the interview acquires the flavor of a free exchange between peers.

The crux of the discussion is contained in Napolitano's declaration that "the fundamental task before us (in Italy and Western Europe generally) is to affirm working class hegemony through the democratic process." In the expansion upon this theme, there are some significant emphases.

With respect to the democratic process, for example, the recurrent emphasis is upon the direct, active participation of the many millions. This is not only a matter of desire or intention. Napolitano cites striking instances in which Italian Communists have acted as effective champions of grassroots democracy.

He refers more than once to Gramsci's injunction that a class aspiring to hegemony must be capable of sacrificing crude or narrow economic interests to reach a "certain equilibrium in compromise" with the social groups it proposes to lead. Preoccupation with narrow group interests contradicts Gramsci's conception of hegemony in which the working class is first convinced and then persuades other subordinate social groups that it possesses not only the economic and political competence, but also the cultural and moral authority to assume leadership of society.

In political practice this idea of sacrifice is not easily implemented. Discussion of the difficulties is broadened to encompass the overall issue of tensions and conflicts within any alliance that includes a variety of groups and interests, and it ranges from the Chilean experience, to Lenin's New Economic Policy, to present day Italian politics.

Even more complex, perhaps,



Antonio Gramsci, Marxist theoretician, as a young man.

is another policy flowing from the conception of hegemony. Dominating Italian politics is the recognition of a profound crisis—economic, social, political, a crisis of hegemony. In confronting this crisis, Napolitano argues, it is not enough for the working class movement to limit itself to denunciations of capitalism and its masters, or to actions purely in defense of the workers' economic interests. It must offer a program for resolving the crisis in terms that correspond to political realities. One of these realities is that neither the left alone,

nor any other single political force, can resolve the crisis. This, in essence, is the problem addressed in the "historic compromise" proposed by the Italian CP.

Many more specific topics are covered. The world communist movement. Internationalism. Attitudes toward the Soviet Union. The nature of the crisis of contemporary capitalism. The relationship between the Italian CP's program for structural reform and the transition to socialism. It is not possible here to summarize "positions" on even the most important of the topics. What is

suggested, however, is the comprehensiveness of the interview and its methodology.

We are not given a series of dicta. We are offered a critical examination of complex problems as they are confronted and perceived and responded to in action by one of the very few contemporary organizations that is a significant political and ideological force, not only in its own country, but in the global arena.

—Al Richmond

Al Richmond is, among other things, the author of *A Long View from the Left*.

Why poor people's movements fail as they succeed

They win through movements, not organizations.

POOR PEOPLE'S MOVEMENTS: Why They Succeed, How They Fail

By Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward
Pantheon, 1977, \$12.95

Piven and Cloward have written a very important book, which calls out for discussion and debate. Their thesis is deceptively simple: poor people gain when they engage in the politics of disruption; lose when they focus on organization building, lobbying and electoral politics. In short, poor people win through movements, not organizations.

The authors bolster their argument with an analysis of two poor people's movements from

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the 1930s and two from the 1960s. Common elements can be identified in all cases.

As economic and social crises mount, poor people go through a transitional period where they stop blaming themselves for their condition and come, more and more, to see the system as the problem. (e.g., before the New Deal, with "welfare" mostly a private matter and economic conditions at their worst, an "unemployed workers' movement" began. "As indignation mounted... some people not only defied the prohibition against going on the dole, but some even began to defy the apparatus of ritualized humiliation that had made that prohibition so effective." Soon, large numbers of people with relatively loose organization came together "in sporadic street demonstrations, in rent riots, and in the disruption of relief centers.")

The revolt spreads quickly, and the first line of state defense (local sources of revenue) soon become exhausted. This forces local

officials, including big city mayors and business leaders, to lobby in Washington for federal aid and for progressive changes in the welfare law. These officials become, in effect, poor people's lobbyists.

If, however, poor people's groups themselves shift to organization building and lobbying, they lose their direct action focus, are coopted and doomed to failure. That is the lesson Piven and Cloward draw from the history of the Workers' Alliance during the Depression and the National Welfare Rights Organization of the '60s. On the former, they state: "That leadership failed to understand that government does not need to meet the demands of an organized vanguard in order to assuage mass unrest, although it does have to deal with the unrest itself." As for the NWRO, as it "gradually became enmeshed in a web of relationships with governmental officials and private groups, it was transformed from a protest organiza-

tion to a negotiating and lobbying organization... The political beliefs of those in the leadership stratum became more conventional, the militancy of the tactics they advocated weakened, and the presumed goal of membership expansion receded."

Finally, the hierarchical, representative nature of the organization removes poor people from its day to day activities. They lose their activism and with it a sense of themselves as powerful.

Although Piven and Cloward take a critical stance toward these movements, they give them their due. Both have played a role in the history they recount, and theirs is a criticism filled with understanding and passion. Certainly the movements have helped raise the living standards of the poor and eliminated much of the daily terror black people have faced. But more could have been done. The need to seize the right time to press the issue cannot be underestimated. As "periods of profound social dislocations are

infrequent, so too are opportunities for protest among the lower classes."

Piven and Cloward's critique of organizations includes unstated anarchist analysis, and the tactics they describe as successful might well be considered anarchist actions.

While disruption may work in the short run, can organization be dispensed with over the long haul? The authors do not deal with long term strategies, but they might answer that for the poor, long term planning is a luxury they can ill afford.

Another issue remains: the possibility of alliance between the non-working poor and the working poor. Scapegoating of the first group for the votes of the second has always been a dishonorable American political tradition. Bringing these groups together, while at the same fighting anti-poor politicians and legislation, is an honorable goal in need of a strategy.

—Maynard Seider