

Women's Writes

Documentary history of women in the U.S.

THE FEMALE EXPERIENCE:
An American Documentary
By Gerda Lerner
Bobbs-Merrill, \$12.50

Despite its grandiose title, this is a worthwhile anthology of documents about American women, chiefly in the 19th century. Apparently intended as a text in American history and women's studies, it reads easily and contains valuable material for the history of socialist and feminist thought.

Over half the book comes from previously unpublished manuscripts, mostly diaries and letters. Rare printed sources contribute another third. Lerner wisely stresses material not readily available elsewhere. For example, she scans the suffrage movement but includes items on women's institution-building in health care. Most of the documents are coherent and satisfying as excerpted—an improvement over the author's useful but fragmented 1972 collection, *Black Women in White America*.

Lerner divides her book into three main sections: "The Female Life Cycle"; "Women in Male-Defined Society," that is, women in the public spheres of education, paid work, and politics; and "A New Definition of Womanhood." Many familiar figures speak to us (Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Sarah Grimke, Elizabeth Blackwell, Louisa May Alcott) and some exciting new heroines also emerge.

We learn that Salome Lincoln, a mill worker and strike leader



Gerda Lerner, whose other books include *THE WOMAN IN AMERICAN HISTORY* and *BLACK WOMEN IN WHITE AMERICA*.

turned preacher, lectured in public in 1827, ten years before the celebrated Grimke tour. Fascinating Jane Swisshelm ran away from her husband, founded and ran a newspaper and later became a Civil War nurse. Lerner includes a sampler of documents by black, immigrant, rural and working-class women and a few pieces by men to or about women.

Her section on the life cycle emphasizes the confinement inherent in women's traditional roles. Yet her selections also illustrate the attractive warmth of the 19th century family. One girl who grew up under an oppressive Calvinist father tells us that when

she feared damnation, she insisted her father keep his arms around her. We see independent daughters learning from their mothers' examples, and we appreciate the social and familial contexts of sickness and death in women's lives.

The lack of effective birth control, Lerner argues, made 19th century American women use the language of sexual purity where we would speak of controlling our own bodies. She prints remarkable, casual letters from young Lucy Stone to her brothers and sister on the advisability of "marital restraint."

Several documents illustrate

the productive, demanding life of the preindustrial housewife. Among other tasks, Lydia Maria Childa wrote 235 letters and six newspaper articles, made three pairs of corsets, mended 70 pair of stockings and swept her house 350 times in 1864. No wonder Catherine Beecher's *Domestic Receipt Book*, a 1846 best seller, assured housewives "you really have great trials to meet."

The section on housework is closed by Mary Inman's fine 1940 analysis written for *Daily People's World*. Inman argues against the notion that the husband is the wife's employer and instead shows capitalism profiting from housework while the housewife is "robbed" both "of the value of her toil" and of "credit for doing useful labor."

The section of the book on "Women in Male-Defined Society" includes several documents on organizing women workers, as well as debates by UAW and ILWU representatives about protective legislation, equal pay and the ERA. We also hear the views of trade unionist Rose Schneiderman, socialist Lena Morrow Lewis and revolutionary Elizabeth Gurley Flynn.

Lerner notes how conservative and patriarchal "ideology is adapted to and transformed in the interest of class privilege" in a book advising maids how to behave. And we find the resolutions of the Salem, Ohio, Women's Rights Convention in 1850 deeply conscious of class distinctions under patriarchy. "One class of society dooms women to a life of drudgery, another to one of dependence and frivolity." They recommend instead a single standard of morality and of educational and occupational opportunity for men and all women.

The last section of the book is

the least clear in its conception. Material on "the right to her own body," focusing on birth control, protection from rape and freedom of sexual preference, seems to belong with earlier discussions of "marital restraint."

Lerner claims that Elizabeth Cady Stanton has "an astonishingly modern approach" to female self-sufficiency and that Sojourner Truth "finally and completely transcended social restraints... She personifies the liberated woman." Yet Lerner consistently underplays the Christian context of the 19th century American feminism that caused Stanton to identify her cause with "the individuality of each human soul—our Protestant idea."

Lerner's documents always speak for themselves; her editorial comments do not. She refers to women as "they," but American history as "ours." She argues persuasively that women's history will need a new periodization not based on male politics, but she provides nothing except large generalizations about industrialization and urbanization. She says women "always have been at least half of all Americans," but later refers to an undefined "sex ratio" favorable to women.

Finally, Lerner asserts that the "step-by-step progression by which women emancipate themselves intellectually... was repeated over and over again, by succeeding generations of women." Her documents provide splendid examples of such individual emancipation and of some of the organizational efforts of American women based on this new consciousness.

—Judith Kegan Gardiner
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A model for the other states to match

NYCLU GUIDE TO WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN NEW YORK STATE
By Eve Cary
Pantheon, N.Y., 1978, \$1.65

For women (and men) who live in New York State there is now available a well-organized, easily understood, pocket-size paperback guide to women's rights un-

der the existing law and how to go about getting them. Women (and men) in the other 49 states should be so lucky.

The guide was written by Eve Cary, who served for seven years as a staff attorney for the New York Civil Liberties Union and has done two other books on related subjects, *The Rights of Students* and *Women and the Law*.

The areas covered include marriage, name change and divorce; reproductive freedom (birth control and/or abortion), pregnancy and rape; employment and unemployment; social security, welfare and taxes—not in that order. But perhaps the most valuable chapter of all is the one entitled "How to Go About Making the Law Work for You."

THE NYCLU GUIDE TO WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN NEW YORK STATE

Eve Cary

In six pages of large print, Cary makes suggestions about the best direction in which to look for redress of grievances, gives directions on how to draw up a complaint, explains the possible results of such a step, and finishes off with a list of the addresses and phone numbers of city, state and federal agencies that are supposed to help women obtain the rights they have won on the statute books.

The book is not only eminently worth its low price for those in a geographic position to put it to use; it should also serve as a model and a motivator for women's and civil liberties groups above and beyond the Hudson. —J.S.

Farce Premises Farce Promises

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erans. As a result the movie hangs together and builds laughter and audience involvement to the last frames of the final fade.

The problems of youth.

One reason for the success of *I Wanna Hold Your Hand* and the flimsiness of its content may be the conviction on the part of its makers that "the target movie audience for commercial films is now between the ages of 15 and 30."

Zemeckis told *IN THESE TIMES* that "after 30, people just don't go to the movies. They're married and probably have a kid, and

it's too expensive or something." Whether or not this is true, the people who are making (and financing) films apparently believe it. Designing entertainment for this audience seems to mean plots about teen-age problems, played by casts whose average age is half way between 15 and 30, written and directed by prodigies to whom Stephen Spielberg (the 30-year-old creator of *Jaws* and *Close Encounters*) is an old man.

Getting born.

Another interesting contrast between the two films is the story of their birth pains.

Rivers has an established repu-

tation as a writer as well as a performer, and her husband, Edgar Rosenberg, is a successful TV producer. But when they took the screenplay of *Rabbit Test* around to studios for the necessary backing, it was turned down, as Rivers told *IN THESE TIMES*, "on the grounds that Elaine May's last picture bombed."

In the end the couple decided to do it themselves. They formed Laugh or Die Productions and began to raise the million dollars they figured they needed. Before they were through they had hosted 261 dinner parties for prospective investors and mortgaged the family home. They got the money—without the blessing of the banks, and with Rivers directing "because we couldn't afford the people we really wanted"—and the film was brought in for a few thousand under the budget.

(Last week *Variety* reported that *Rabbit Test* was the biggest box-office grosser in the nation. The investors will get their money

back and the Rivers-Rosenberg homestead will not be foreclosed.)

Zemeckis and Gale had no such struggle. They took their idea to a pair of women producers, Tarama Asseyev and Alex Rose, who were old enough to remember the actual invasion by the Liverpooldians, and on the basis of a one-sentence synopsis, they got a deal that subsidized the writing of the screenplay.

They took the finished script to Stephen Spielberg, who liked it and them, and agreed to act as executive producer. On the strength of his commitment, Universal was persuaded to put up \$3 million, provide all production facilities and handle national distribution. According to Zemeckis, Spielberg did not interfere in production decisions and may even have been responsible for restraining the studio from "normal" interference.

What next?

In a satiric farce about the way

motion pictures are manufactured, Zemeckis and Gale would have choked to death on these silver spoons. In real life, they are already at work on a second screenplay, to be directed by Spielberg, and are thinking about a third, which Zemeckis will direct and Gale will produce.

Rivers and collaborator Redack are also at work on a second script—something about a plot to kidnap an entire line of chorus girls. Money is available, but they are opting for the independence of Laugh or Die Productions. Rivers will, of course, direct.

It would be nice for all us movie-goers if she has learned from the mistakes made in *Rabbit Test* that farce is a horse that must not be allowed to get the bit between his teeth, and if Zemeckis and Gale learn from their success that once you've got a bridle on the critter, you can trust it to carry more weight than a box of popcorn and a can of diet coke.

—Janet Stevenson

Farce Premises Farce Promises



Satiric farce is the most effective, popular kind of social criticism, but it's a very tricky form. Two writer/directors tackle it in their first films, with differing results.

RABBIT TEST

Written by Joan Rivers and Jay Redack
Directed by Joan Rivers
Produced by Edgar Rosenberg
Avco-Embassy release, Rated PG

I WANNA HOLD YOUR HAND

Written by Robert Zemeckis and Bob Gale
Directed by Robert Zemeckis
Produced by Tamara Asseyev and Alex Rose
Universal release, Rated PG

Satiric farce is one of the brightest stars in the firmament of American humor, probably the most effective and certainly the most popular medium of social criticism. There's been a lot of it around lately: films like *Fun with Dick and Jane* and *Which Way Is Up*, and most of Woody Allen's; TV's *Saturday Night Live*; Chicago's Second City cabaret and similar improvisational ensembles; and, on records and the radio stations that play them, a spectrum of talent that ranges from the Firesign Theatre to Stan Frieberg.

Most of the time this type of comedy comes off better in short sketches than in full-length treatment. (Even Woody Allen couldn't handle an hour and 40 min-

utes of movie before *Annie Hall*.) But there are two farce comedies now playing the neighborhoods that are doing the kind of business that qualifies them as successful. Both are "firsts" for their respective writer/directors.

Rabbit Test is the "immaculate misconception" of Joan Rivers, an experienced stand-up comedian, who has worked on TV and stage plays, but has never before played in, much less written and directed a motion picture.

I Wanna Hold Your Hand is the work of Robert Zemeckis and Bob Gale, both 26 years old, both graduates of the film department of the University of Southern California and without previous experience at writing and/or directing a commercial feature. (Gale collaborated on the script and served as associate producer. Zemeckis co-wrote and directed solo.)

Few beginners pull off the double challenge of writing and directing on their first try. Two in one season may be the sign of a cinematic renaissance. But what is more significant is the ways in which these "first" films differ because they point up the possibilities and the pitfalls of the form.

There are two parts to the problem—satiric content and farce

form—and one of the difficulties is making them work together.

Satire is essentially serious. It has to be *against* (and therefore, *for*) something of importance to society. From Aristophanes to the *National Lampoon*, corruption in government has been a prime target. Gilbert and Sullivan compiled a list of "society offenders who might well be underground." Stan Frieberg's poison darts were aimed at the advertising industry and its effect on America's values. Woody Allen has a "little list" much longer than G&S's.

Joan Rivers gets off to a good start with the notion that, for the first time in human history, casual sex leaves the man, instead of the woman, pregnant. It's a set-up for attacking stereotyped sex roles, but Rivers also has other targets in mind—like the callousness of hospitals, the venality of doctors, the Madison Avenue approach to foreign policy.

The trouble is she hasn't made a very good movie—not because she can't handle satire (though she is occasionally guilty of some embarrassing lapses of taste), but because she can't handle the farce form.

Most of what Rivers takes pokes at deserves it. When one of her punches lands, there are

cheers along with laughter. But a lot of the time she is swinging wild. Rivers is mistress of the one-liner, but the screen is essentially a visual, not an aural medium. A joke that would be hilarious if she tossed it at you on stage (or in close-up) without changing the expression on her pretty, blank little face, gets beaten to death on the wide screen, even by such old hands as Imogene Coca and George Gobel.

But the biggest problem is the underlying structure of her plot. Farce is a very rigid form. It must start with an illogical premise (the pregnant male, for example) and proceed thereafter in a consistent logic of cause and effect. Rivers violates her own logic time and again, planting a plot line in one sequence, only to trip over and uproot it in the next.

Interest starts to sag. She labors harder to shore it up. The story begins to zig-zag as crazily as a ball in a pin-ball machine. Laughter in the audience falters more and more frequently and finally dies out.

The case with *I Wanna Hold Your Hand* is just the reverse. Social criticism, at least for the present, is not an element in Zemeckis and Gale's "philosophy." They have thought about "the object

of the motion picture art" and concluded, according to Zemeckis, that it is "to entertain."

But if these young filmmakers are not very original thinkers on aesthetics, they are way out in front in matters of technique. Satire may not be their thing. But farce is.

Their premise is that six perfectly normal New Jersey teenagers go temporarily insane because they want to get into the Beatles' U.S. debut on the Ed Sullivan show. From the moment when the class square "borrows" a limousine from his father's undertaking establishment, one thing follows from another with indisputable logic.

It's not a real world up there on the screen. (People can fall out of speeding cars, dive through plate glass, get struck by lightning, and so forth, without getting hurt.) But it is absolutely consistent in its unreality. The plot twists and turns, faster and faster, with more and more outrageous results, but it is never out of the writers' control.

The direction is equally authoritative. Zemeckis has imposed on his ebullient young performers the kind of restraint that Rivers did not manage to impose on her vet-

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