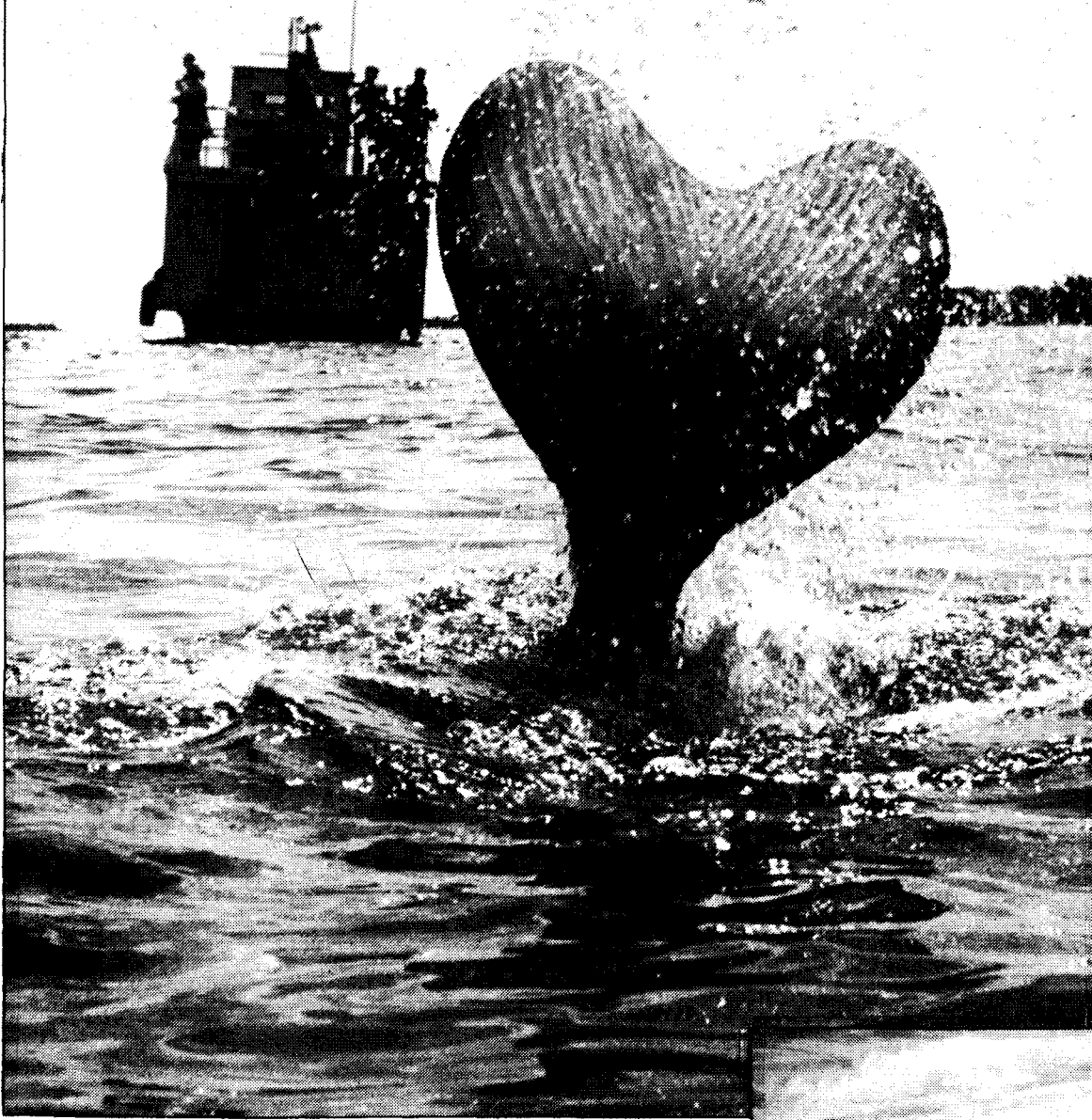


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FILMS

An old myth out of water

By Pat Aufderheide

In the spring, Hollywood's fancy turns to "date movies," boy-girl specials for that golden 12-to-24 audience as well as the rest of us who don't mind a break into bathos from the daily grind.

This season the romantic assault is particularly fierce, and it's spearheaded by *Splash!*, a triumphal number one in box office across the nation. The movie is so much fun, and so widely loved, that it deserves a second look—not just as a sporty vehicle for escape, but as a carrier of social values. After all, mass-market fantasy only really works if it's rooted in mass realities.

In *Splash!*, a hard-working, earnest vegetable wholesaler (Tom Hanks) looks in vain for true love. He finds it in the sea, where he meets a mermaid (Daryl Hannah). She falls for him and follows him to the streets of New York and corridors of Bloomingdale's, before enchanting him right back into the sea with her.

The film is a delightful confection. Hannah's winsome lip-biting, her slim figure and long blonde hair set a new unattainable goal for American women. The dialogue (by Bruce Jay Friedman) makes witty fun of the trials of everyday urban life, and Ron Howard's super-slick direction makes ironic commentary on the new consumerism. (Working in TV, as Howard did

for years, makes you efficient first and last—but Howard has heart as well.)

It isn't surprising that people are flocking to this film, because it executes its central concept with such charm. But the charm would be nothing without the central concept. In the center of that concept is the mermaid. It's an ancient image and a concise one that neatly summarizes the "natural" female force that matches—and sometimes conquers the "civilized" masculinity

of economics and politics. Ever since Ulysses plugged his ears to sail past the Sirens—the beings who lured men away from war and politics and plunged them into fishy forgetfulness—men have been trying to decide whether or not to put wax in their own ears.

This mermaid is a modernized model of that ancient symbol. Every adolescent boy's dream of the perfect playmate, she's a force of nature with an immense ability to nurture. She is delivered up at the feet of the Statue

of Liberty stark naked, and free of other irritating accessories of social life as well. She is, for instance, silent, unable to communicate except through fish-screeches; and she is also uninhibitedly sexy, vamping the vegetable wholesaler in front of the police sergeant who has filed her among the missing persons.

This mermaid is no Siren, though. She doesn't wield her natural power in order to drag her lover down, at least not on purpose. She just comes to town to visit, and of course she picks up a few survival skills while she's there. But becoming civilized—let's not forget that the word comes from the Latin for "city"—doesn't taint her natural purity.

Why? Because she only masters the aspects of social life that make her an excellent consumer—the modern version of the "silent woman," the passive receiver of civilization's delights. She gets her complete education at Bloomingdale's and talks only the language of TV commercials. She participates in the economy solely through the magic of plastic, with her boyfriend's seemingly limitless credit card.

Not everyone has his infatuated response to the mermaid. Most people want to bring her down to their level, reduce her to an object of scientific study, career advancement or promotional copy. The more this innocent boy and this magical girl go down those mean streets, the better the sea looks. When they both *Daryl Hannah reveals various protuberances in SPLASH!*



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This is the world run by men, and there is something at least as monstrous about it as about a fish-woman.

Underneath the flashy topical references, ancient myths are as alive as ever. Men and women are two different, basically incompatible species. "You can't live with 'em, and you can't live without 'em," says the slang phrase. Only true love—the kind that "takes you away from all this," not the one that could weather doing the dishes—can bridge a gender gap this big. *Splash!* plays on these ancient notions with zest and whimsy.

And in doing so, *Splash!* may mark the inception of a post-feminist era, signalling, in its own small and charming way, the rise of a generation that regards the gains of feminists as fact and their issues as passe. Those Bloomingdale's fashions dress up one of the oldest concepts in the world: that women are only half-human. And that concept has consequences for both men and women—even more so, in fact, for the boy and girl at a "date movie," who probably think a romantic comedy like *Pat and Mike* is about old people long ago.

In the wake of *Splash!*, it seems like a long time since 1976, when feminist writing was an exciting new intellectual field, and when Dorothy Dinnerstein published *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise*. In it, she argued that our rigid sexual roles and attitudes bred dangerous social practices. Furthermore, our male-dominated society stood a good chance of killing off the entire species in our time. And yet it was clear that men and women cooperated in an unjust and unequal separation of sexual powers.

To find out why, she turned to psychology and to the ancient symbols around sexuality in our culture. And she begged readers to pursue a different, more flexible kind of relationship between the sexes. Looking upon women as only half-human, she pointed out, was not only dangerous—it turned men into monsters as well.

Dinnerstein's explorations went to the depths of modern psychology. But it's movies like *Splash!* that bring the same semi-conscious beliefs she studies back up to the cultural surface. This elegantly funny film issues a siren call to the 12-to-24-year-olds, reaffirming the old ideas that women are really part-monsters and that a dialogue between the sexes is possible only through the magic of romance.

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NEW YORK, N.Y.

April 29

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May 5

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finally plunge in, all the film's investment in social irony pays off. We're glad to see them go. Heck, we wish we could go too.

In Greek mythology, mermaids were also destroyers. *Splash!*, though, touches up the ancient imagery. In this version, it's not the mermaid's fault that she lures the hero below the surface of society. She's a victim of true love, as is the boy. The real villain is the grungy world of commerce and cops, of skin magazines and cheap affairs.

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Drama

Continued from page 16

Ronald Reagan, going misty-eyed while describing his miserable bit of thuggery as an heroic rescue, is well within this dramatic tradition.

Risky material, then, for any company in 1601 or 1984. This makes the current production at the Oregon Shakespearean Festival all the more impressive. The choice of script wasn't courageous in and of itself—this company makes a point of performing all of Shakespeare's plays. But instead of mounting a modest studio production and running it for a few performances, the festival has pulled out all the stops, producing a horrific vision of universal war that will play until early September.

The Festival won a special Tony Award last year for its contributions to regional theater. Its repertory is more classical than that of most middle-brow regional companies. The theater survives in Ashland, Ore., by drawing people with money, taste and leisure from San Francisco

and Seattle. Like Shakespeare, the Festival is working ahead of its audience's expectations. As a result, this production concerns contemporary social predicaments more than private torments, unlike many "avant-garde" productions.

Troilus presented unusual problems for director Richard White. It certainly would not be difficult to update the play, since it is virtually impossible to watch these vainglorious Greeks and vengeful Trojans without thinking of Ronald Reagan's cabinet vs. the Politburo. The problem is how to avoid making *Troilus* so narrowly contemporary as to lose Shakespeare's weary sense of perpetually repeated barbarism.

White, set designer William Bloodgood and costume designer Michael Olich solve the problem by means of archeological eclecticism. Bloodgood's set, a crumbling ruin set atop a mound of debris—shattered monuments, castaway armor and human skulls—suggests the layers upon layers of destruction that have built up over eons of warfare, reminding us that the "Troy" of this play is one more layer among many in a refuse heap. Olich draws from many sources, notably samurai films and *The Road Warrior*, to por-

tray a universal military culture and the human fascination with death and its instruments. Todd Barton's shrieking sound score contributes to the effect.

White weaves these elements into a nihilistic whole. Far from avoiding the unpleasantness inherent in the play, he emphasizes it. Human beings and their motives appear downright ugly throughout. The show compels horrified fascination through sheer spectacle and through the repeated question, "What will these murderous idiots do next?"

The execution isn't always up to the conception. Some of the performances are fine, but White sometimes vitiates the atmosphere by allowing actors to work in traditional styles ill-suited to the production's punk pyrotechnics. Joe Vincent, a solid and competent conventional actor, gets away with playing Ulysses as a clean-cut, reasonable leader but he should be a treacherous manipulator and cutthroat.

One of the many anomalies in *Troilus and Cressida* is that the romance is just a subplot drawn from a medieval story. The tale of Troilus, an ardent young Trojan prince, and his lover Cressida (who is traded to the Greeks in a prisoner exchange and promptly throws over Troi-

lus for a cynical Greek warrior) makes the point that love, like everything else, turns foul in endless war.

Todd Cohen is suitable as Troilus, a callow but not detestable young gamecock who can hardly be blamed for growing up with childish notions of honor and vengeance. One critic complained that Cohen seemed more like a basketball player than a tragic hero. That's a good line, but it should have been a compliment, since it captures Troilus' mentality perfectly. (Young Rangers just back from Grenada probably also think that those medals handed out with such abandon make them hot stuff.) Susan Wands is a charming—too charming—Cressida. White should have insisted on a harder and nastier characterization.

This *Troilus and Cressida* is well worth a trip for travelers on Interstate 5 who can stop in Ashland. For those unlikely to make a cultural pilgrimage to rural Oregon, it is still good to remember that the avant-garde is where you find it. As long as we never seem to learn from our mistakes, some plays are always contemporary.

Phillip Johnson is a free-lance writer in Eugene, Ore.

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Ilium Lives and Dies Again

By Phillip Johnson

A STUPID, POINTLESS CONFLICT drags on for years, feeding upon itself and purging civilization until nothing remains but violence and lechery. Societies have become armed camps. One side is led by an affable, cliché-mongering commander-in-chief, a moodily narcissistic military hero and an amoral palace intriguer. The other side is locked into a fortress mentality, its populace reduced to misery while its wealth pours into defense.

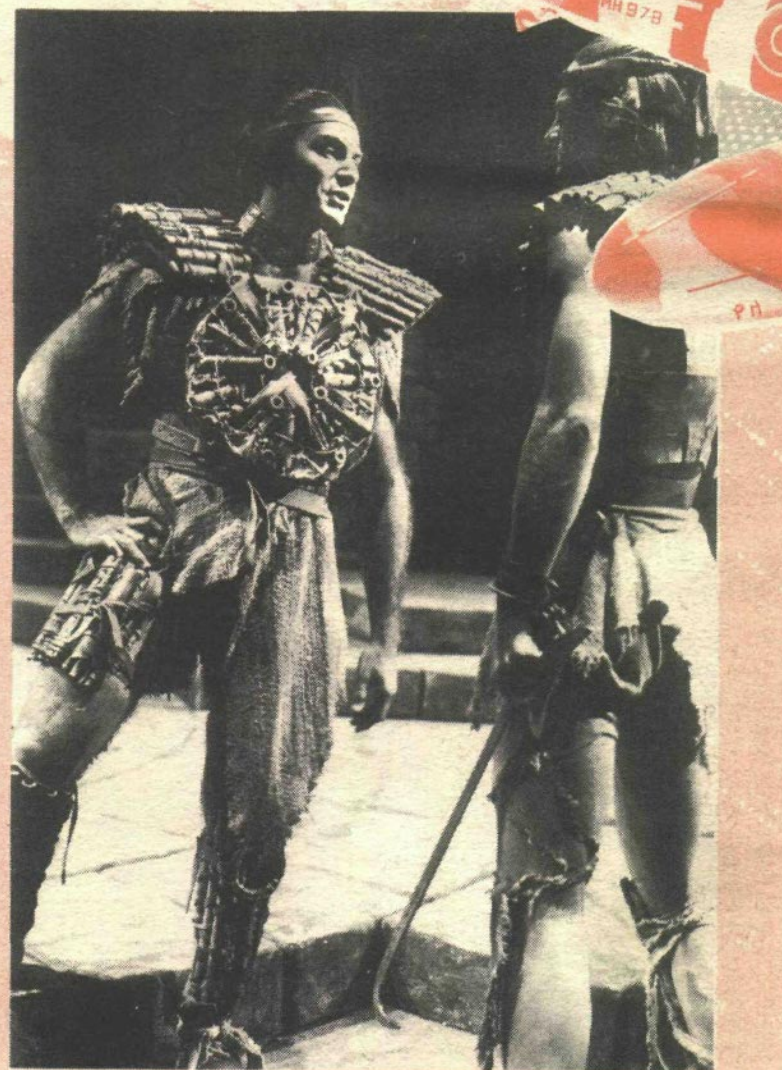
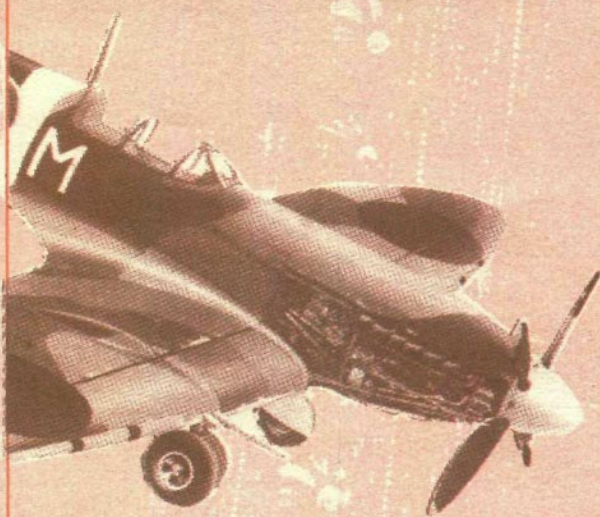
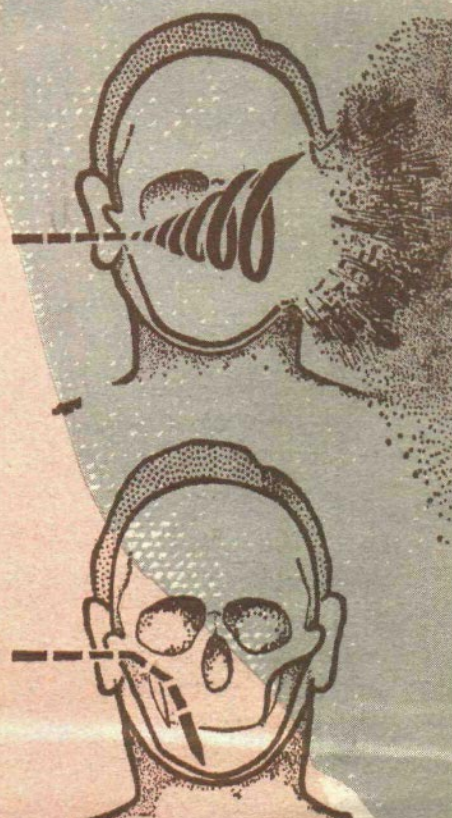
The subject is the Trojan War. Modern parallels are easy to see, so it wouldn't be surprising to find an avant-garde playwright twisting Homer's tale into a send-up of ideological madness and military posturing. Can such a play find an audience in an era when the public is gripped by a deadly fascination for force and belligerence?

The first time around, the answer was no. It is almost certain that *Troilus and Cressida* bombed. And the play's failure to find an Elizabethan audience is understandable. While an undercurrent of cynicism disturbs some of Shakespeare's work, *Troilus and Cressida* is cynical both on the surface and at the core. It is a satire—at times a very funny one—but it does not merely mock excesses and follies. It attacks the brutalizing nature of war itself, which it depicts as the ruling class' callous sport that reduces society to savagery. *Troilus and Cressida* directly assaulted the Elizabethan period's martial ideals: Homer's heroes were taken seriously, and Shakespeare took a chance by making horses' asses of them. A playwright who had stuck with traditional forms of comedy and tragedy suddenly took a leap into the avant-garde, challenging cherished assumptions in the most threatening manner imaginable.

Troilus still waits for its audience. Until late in the last century it was considered unplayable. In recent decades it has received an occasional production, usually in an antiquarian spirit, and the play languishes with such deservedly obscure works as *Timon of Athens* and *Titus Andronicus*. *Troilus*' problem is that it still threatens popular audiences, particularly in this country, where anti-war satires are not exactly the rage.

As our recent spree in Grenada and its public acceptance demonstrate, martial ardor is never far from the surface, even in fashionably cynical times. The traditional function of poets has been to memorialize such sordid episodes and transform them into morale-building mythology. Shakespeare violated the poet's covenant with political power by portraying Homer's characters realistically (although he only made the mistake once).

Continued on page 15



Trojan War is replayed in Oregon