

SEMI-TOUGH, directed by Michael Ritchie

THE MAN WHO LOVED WOMEN, directed by François Truffaut

Semi-delightful

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SATIRE HAS ALWAYS BEEN SOMETHING of an endangered species in the American film; other than Preston Sturges and Billy Wilder, there are few filmmakers indeed who have lampooned our native idiosyncrasies with consistent success. In this context, Michael Ritchie looms increasingly large as one of the most distinctive directors to emerge in the seventies thus far. In the past five years, Ritchie has focused his caustic gaze on such egregious American institutions as the modern political campaign (*The Candidate*), the teen-age beauty contest (*Smile*), and the Little League (*The Bad News Bears*). The results have been a little on the facile side at times, but there's no denying his adroitness at capturing the dogged competitiveness lurking behind the *bonhomie* of our great American pastimes.

In *Semi-Tough* we are on familiar Ritchie terrain—an America of bright shopping malls, dim cocktail lounges, and Astroturf, home and hearth a shrine of flocked wallpaper and Day-Glo naugahyde. Although ostensibly concerned with the world of professional football, its real target is the nationwide quest for instant nirvana in 10 easy lessons, via est, TM, and such. The so-called consciousness movement may not be much of a challenge for parody; to the heathens among us, the portentous double-talk of Werner Erhard and his sort is ludicrous enough simply quoted verbatim. It's also arguable that *Semi-Tough* has come along about a year or two too late to be really topical. Nevertheless, Ritchie and screenwriter Walter Bernstein send up the whole business with just the right note of deadpan malice. Their Frankenstein creation, one "Friedrich Bismarck" (played by Bert Convy), is a plastic monument to homogenized smarminess, and probably the drollest lampoon since all those polyester jaycees who populated *Smile*.

The catch is that Ritchie and Bernstein

have grafted their social broadsides onto a plot harkening back to the screwball romances of 40 years ago. The story revolves around a blissed-out football player (Kris Kristofferson) who's found enlightenment, his earthbound teammate (Burt Reynolds) who knows he doesn't want it, and their wisecracking female pal (Jill Clayburgh), who can't make up her mind. As in *Design for Living*, the three cohabit in pure harmony until desire rears its alluring head, while all is eventually resolved in a *Philadelphia Story* last-reel switcheroo at the altar. Throughout, irony and charm keep battling it out for equal screen time, a tussle which Ritchie never quite manages to resolve because the two are absolutely at cross-purposes with each other. Parody requires quick reflexes and a touch of contempt for the boobs being spoofed; romantic comedy needs a somewhat more leisurely rhythm, so that the audience has a chance to warm up to the characters at hand.

The result is a kind of amiable chaos—*Semi-Tough* may well be Ritchie's most likable movie, but his usual hard-edged

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momentum is dissipated in the process. Thanks to its meandering structure and an editing job that tries to stitch all the conflicting strands together, the movie barely makes sense at times. Early on, the audience is prepared to view an est rally in Miami and ends up on a plane for Green Bay, Wisconsin; an elaborate gag is set up in one reel, only to be dropped and then clumsily resuscitated 20 minutes later. Ritchie himself seems more than a little baffled by all the confusion. Despite his penchant for knock-about humor, he completely fumbles the wedding ceremony free-for-all at the movie's climax—the kind of stock sequence any second-string TV-movie director could do via remote control.

Yet whatever *Semi-Tough* lacks in the realm of logic and finesse is largely compensated for by the casting of Burt Reynolds in the updated Cary Grant role. In the right sort of lighthearted vehicles, Reynolds is probably the most ingratiating star performer in current American movies.

Like Grant, he manages to convey a sense of total relaxation to the camera and the audience, and his puckish air of skepticism extends past the script and the foibles of his movie comrades to include his own sexual prowess, thus taking the edge off all that masculine swagger. Reynolds's low-keyed comic skills have never been better exploited than in *Semi-Tough*, and the film also makes apt use of Kristofferson's opaque-eyed, burly spaciness. Jill Clayburgh is a little more problematic. She manages to strike the requisite balance of sweetness and forthrightness, while affecting a Texas chainsaw twang with great aplomb. At the same time, she's up against a script which insists upon this character's devastating physical appeal, and a cameraman who seems determined to prove otherwise. Nevertheless, she's been far better served here than in her two previous film outings, and the underplayed warmth generated between her and Reynolds is sufficient to make something semi-delightful out of *Semi-Tough*.

JUST AS *SEMI-TOUGH* IS A quintessentially American movie, Truffaut's *The Man Who Loved Women* couldn't be more prototypically Gallic if it tried. Where else but in a French movie would a protagonist's dual passion be for sex and *belles lettres*, with the latter almost winning the contest? The basic plot might be viewed as a kind of *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* in reverse; like Theresa Dunn, Bertrand (played by Charles Denner) spices up his humdrum daily life with profligate evenings, from which he always wakes up alone, by choice. While the relentless pursuit of carnal joy leads to a sorry demise in both cases, Truffaut is an unabashed humanist and Richard Brooks, director of *Goodbar*, a strident moralist, which makes a world (or at least a continent) of difference in terms of tone. Thankfully, Truffaut resists the temptation to turn this character into a searing general indictment of the decline of Western civilization. Rather, he's presented as a bitter-sweet eccentric—aberrant no doubt, but totally harmless save perhaps to himself. Intense, ferret-faced Denner is so enamored of women in the abstract that he can never connect for long with any one in particular. The pursuit is far more tantalizing than the object itself; the greater the challenge, the more mesmerized he becomes. In a certain sense he's the polar opposite of Truffaut's *Adele H.*, whose obsession for one man was so all-encompassing that no one else existed for her at all. Yet they're linked by the same driving impulses—clearly it's the basic nature of monomania that fascinates Truffaut, rather than the particular motivation at hand.

Many of the rapturous notices the film has received thus far have cited its warmth and charm, the two precise qualities which are completely lacking as far as I'm concerned. Almost everything about the film exudes a kind of wintry melancholy, from the brownish, muted color scheme to Den-



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ner's dour, introverted performance. One of France's most intelligent character actors, Denner has never displayed the requisite magnetism to sustain an entire film by himself (a point particularly underscored 15 years ago when Chabrol cast him in *Landru*, where, ironically enough, he played a literal lady-killer). Truffaut seems to have chosen Denner precisely because he's the antithesis of the stereotypically strutting Don Juan; it's a crucial point that women warm to him because of the desperate sincerity he exudes, rather than being melted by looks or bravado. Whatever the rationale, Denner's enervated presence and the film's relentlessly episodic structure drain *The Man Who Loved Women* of much of its vitality by the last few reels.

The film's saving grace is the array of vibrant performances Truffaut has elicited from Denner's long procession of conquests. Observed with neither mawkishness nor condescension, these women run the gamut from a brisk, lucid editor (Brigitte Fossey), who succumbs even though she sees his adolescent compulsion for what it is, to a manic housewife (Nelly Bourgeaud), who enjoys her adultery spiced with a *souçon* of peril. Every one of them is portrayed with humor and insight—again, the contrast between these women and their Gothic case-history male counterparts in *Goodbar* is too obvious to be ignored. Obviously Truffaut is the one who really loves and wants to understand women, and the product of that fascination makes this movie the moderately satisfying experience it is. □

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