

evidence? We are treated to at least 18 accounts of illness and page after page of salons, drawing rooms, and titled or wealthy ladies fawning over the little Pole. Time and time again we are reminded that Chopin was "pale," that he had "skin milk white," that he was the color of "parchment." And contemporary critics are cited carping about Chopin's "weak tone," his "slight sonority"; that he played "too quietly," "too delicately."

Marek omits any support for his offensive assertions that the lovely pianist Marie Pleyel "was a nymphomaniac," that Delfina Potocka's husband was "probably a sadist, possibly epileptic," or that it is "almost certainly untrue" that George Sand attempted to visit the dying Chopin and was turned away. Offering some evidence for such claims would have expanded the text only slightly while greatly contributing to the author's credibility.

Yet, such unsupported statements abound in this book. They lessen its impact considerably, even though it contains more than enough *adequate* treatments of relationships and events to keep it from being thought of as hack work. Particularly fine are the handling of Chopin's Warsaw years (his family, education, and early performances), of his intimacies and friendships with the women in his life, of his experiences as one of history's greatest pianists (almost a performance by performance account), of his last illness, and of the pitiful events involving his sister Louise that followed his magnificent funeral. These sections command our attention. They call on our sympathies and emotions. From time to time, they engage the mind, leading us to rethink Chopin's life in relation to his milieu and to his composition of melodically luxuriant, enduring works. To back up the text, eight pages of interesting and, at times, rare illustrations have been included. They serve to whet the appetite, not to satisfy it. Chopin cries out for pictorial documentation, so extraordinary were his four decades of existence.

Perhaps no one else, outside the pages of fiction, ever lived so romantic a life. To revisit it now, even through the somewhat flawed medium of this biography, is to know Chopin better. And that, in itself, is a step toward understanding the mysterious attraction that his music continues to exert upon uncountable listeners today. ■

# F I L M

## New York Film Festival II

STEPHEN HARVEY

**I**T WOULD BE NAIVE TO think that the habitués of the New York Film Festival flock like swallows each fall to Lincoln Center merely to see an assortment of *movies*, for heaven's sake. That would be like believing that all those Met subscribers come back week after week simply because they're languishing to see *Madama Butterfly* for the twenty-third time. After all, much of the festival lineup reaches the movie houses around town practically as soon as the final credits fade from the screen at Alice Tully Hall. So why bother to sign away two weeks of your life to ensure that your check gets to the box office before half of New York's 263,000 cinephiles get back from their summer sojourns in the Hamptons?

Actually, the festival is as much a state of mind as it is a sampling of 20-odd domestically untried movies. For many, it combines glamor (of the Isn't-that-Diane-Keaton-talking-to-Luis-Buñuel-over-by-the-water-fountain variety) with high seriousness of purpose. There's a certain cachet just in being one of the select two thousand who Saw It There First. As you read this, someone in Manhattan is doubtless still regaling a yawning someone else with that saga of how the electricity filled the air the night the festival premiered *Last Tango in Paris*, six years ago; by now, all those who claim to have been there could scarcely squeeze into Shea Stadium.

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Festival audiences exude a sense of their own prescience and discernment, quite unlike the cowed throngs at the first-run houses on the East Side. As the films unreel, the bored unashamedly walk out, and, at the end, competing choruses of hisses and bravos erupt as the hapless director takes a bow from the right-hand box.

This year's array, however, seemed hardly calculated to incite much passion on any side. Accordingly, those festival-goers in search of controversy pounced on a few items that, in other times, would have passed on with scarcely a murmur. One such was Bertrand Blier's newest, ***Get Out Your Handkerchiefs***. Compared to his slapstick horror, *Going Places*, of a few years back, this is pretty mild stuff, but you would never have known it from the high-pitched reaction the movie provoked in New York a few weeks ago. Some extravagantly touted its alleged richness and audacity (viz., Pauline Kael in *The New Yorker*); others (mostly male, oddly enough) fulminated against its supposed misogynistic whimsy. I, however, can't fathom what all the shouting is about on either side of the barricades.

Blier's film is eccentric, to be sure, right from its addled opening scene. Seated in a Parisian restaurant, lunk-headed Raoul (Gerard Depardieu) has come to the end of his tether, trying without success to persuade his catatonic wife, Solange (Carole Laure), to eat, speak, smile, or show any signs of animation whatever—to the point that he randomly picks out of the lunchtime crowd a scraggly young aesthete (Patrick Dewaere) to bed Solange and rouse her emotions. From there, the movie proceeds along a gossamer strand of surreal logic; anyone within a kilometer's radius of this female immovable object is sucked in as if by a vacuum. (This inelegant analogy is all too apt, as it happens. Blier's men are ruled by gonads and pride, claiming that Solange, to become truly content, needs only to be made pregnant. As it turns out they are absolutely right.) Bound in a cult of Solange-worship, the two men develop a deep bond of their own—a sexless one, at least on the surface of it.

Thus distracted, they scarcely notice at first when Solange finds the companion of her woozy dreams in an eggheaded 13-year-old persecuted by his peers, and consummates the union quicker than you can say *Thé et Symphonie*.

The journey toward the wistfully wry denouement is engagingly offbeat; having tried out their tandem routines in *Going Places*, Dewaere and Depardieu play off each other with enormous éclat, ever mindful of the adage that first-rate farce must be played as if the business at hand were frightfully serious indeed. Blier has undeniable skill at capturing the absurd, persuasive detail, and he hones each individual episode (of which there are perhaps a score too many) with rare finesse and economy. It's all fun while it lasts, but in retrospect Blier's itinerary doesn't stand up to scrutiny. It seems to be leading to some grand cosmic theories on the true natures of men and women, but in the end Blier appears to be as nonplussed by the enigmatic creatures he's created as is the viewer. Are we to presume that women are really just bleak voids waiting to be filled, and men their interchangeable suppliants whose final reward is oblivion? As actors in an irrational world, they all seem pretty schematic to me. *Get Out Your Handkerchiefs* is provocatively fanciful, like one of Buñuel's lesser non sequiturs, but ultimately it's just about as vacant as Laure's brown bovine eyes.

**R**OBERT ALTMAN'S *A Wedding*, which opened the festival, likewise infuriated as many as it enchanted, but to me it proved only that even a director of real stature is capable of turning out something of supreme unimportance. After this, Altman might well consider retiring his decadent-community-as-American-microcosm bit once and for all, considering how threadbare the formula has become by now. Since *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* and *Nashville*, a dismaying thing seems to have happened to Altman—his satirical goals have shrunk while the size of his acting ensemble has expanded to the bursting point. In *Buffalo Bill and the Indians*, he was so intent on hammering home the hot news of our beastliness to the Indians that everyone onscreen was reduced to cigar-store totems and palefaced targets in a shooting gallery. In *A Wedding*, Altman's camera drifts for two hours past nearly fifty per-

formers representing various subspecies of the Boobus Americanus, all for the purpose of proving what a ludicrous sham our native nuptial rituals are. Well, this is hardly going to come as a revelation to anyone who's attended such orgies of conspicuous consumption, or even just seen them lampooned in movies from *Father of the Bride* to *Goodbye, Columbus*.

All of which wouldn't matter much if Altman had derived anything fresh or penetrating from the subject, but it's merely the excuse for some easy snipes inspired more by variety sketch shtick than firsthand observation. Altman's contempt is so blatant that we're given no chance to make any judgments of our own—the viewer becomes an accomplice whether he wants to or not. Even had Altman wished it otherwise, there simply isn't time to give his huge cast of characters any human dimensions—as soon as one shows his venal colors, we're off to

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jeer at someone else. In *A Wedding* the groom's family are mostly patrician WASPS, and the bride's is a passel of redneck arrivistes, but whether Meissen or earthenware, they're all just clay pigeons.

If a few are spared Altman's cheapest shots, the reasons seem to have more to do with exigencies of casting than anything else. The waning matriarch on the groom's side is viewed less witheringly than most, probably because she's played by that indefatigable legend, Lillian Gish—even Altman must pause at the thought of trying to make her look like a fool. Reputedly, Altman's actors are so loyal and adoring because he gives them so much liberty to improvise on their roles, but in fact his rigid type-casting undercuts all this alleged freedom. His performers may have been told to do what comes naturally; if so, they responded by trotting out what we've seen them do before in film after

film, for Altman and others. Sister of the bride Mia Farrow serves up her wistful zombie routine, caterer Viveca Lindfors mutters and flutters, wedding coordinator Geraldine Chaplin is all fussy, unctuous inefficiency. Fortunately, the law of averages dictates that a few performers are bound to end up with less egg on their faces than others. Howard Duff does a pleasantly relaxed job as the bibulous family doctor, and Dina Merrill's blue-blooded steeliness is well utilized for the groom's take-charge aunt. Carol Burnett as the fatuous mother of the bride, in the throes of menopausal puppy love, is really a benign variation on the Eunice character from her TV show—contrast the part with the adulterous wife Lily Tomlin played in *Nashville* and you see what an easy mark she is for Altman's scorn. Yet Burnett's earthy intelligence reins in the caricature—as the one trained *farceuse* in the troupe, she knows when to keep her full artillery of tricks in check.

I suppose I wouldn't have minded Altman's facile snideness so much if *A Wedding* had at least been truly funny, but the movie is too diffuse and cluttered to bring the comedy off. Altman doesn't seem to know how to build to a gag—the actors' timing and the editing are always a bit lax, the camera always perversely finds just the angle that will blunt the effect of the joke at hand. Burnett, of course, could be a riot even in a Super-8 home movie, but her costars are left to flounder embarrassingly. Besides, Altman's notion of what's uproarious strikes me as more than a little peculiar. If the octogenarian senility of John Cromwell's officiating bishop doesn't grab you with mirth, there's always the nymphomania of Farrow's retarded teenager for a real belly laugh. The bleakest note of all is the calculated twinge of pathos Altman introduces at the end, when a car wreck polishes off a few of the nuptial merrymakers. After all, how can you kill off characters who never came to life in the first place?

Unlike *A Wedding*, *Newsfront* prompted no such storms of disagreement; the only possible reaction I could imagine to this genial Australian film is low-keyed pleasure. It tells of the heyday of the local newsreel industry from the end of the war through its TV-induced twilight a decade later, focusing on one dedicated cameraman doggedly recording fires, floods, and political upheavals Down Under. It's

a fresh subject, particularly for those of us whose knowledge of Australia is restricted to a reading of *The Thorn Birds*, and it's handled with a sprightly intelligence. *Newsfront* exudes affection for the lost newsreel craft, reviewing a 10-year span of local history and the jingoistic, March of Time veil of platitudes in which the newsreels enveloped it, with the same caustically tinged air of nostalgia. Documentary footage and recreation of real events are seamlessly intermingled, while the milieu inhabited by the fictional characters is evoked with extraordinary care, attention, and humor. Although the energy of the first half eventually dribbles to a rather lackadaisical finale, *Newsfront* is a very distinctive job that promises much in store from its 28-year-old director, Philip Noyce.

**F**ITTINGLY ENOUGH, closing night was reserved for a film that summed up the pervasive tone of this year's lineup. Craftsmanlike, thoughtful, and very cool to the touch, Chabrol's *Violette Nozière* discards the idiosyncratic passion that informed most of his earlier melodramas of homicide and misplaced lust. Based on events that mesmerized the French press and public during the early thirties, *Violette Nozière* is the portrait of a restless 18-year-old whose flair for role-playing reaches fatal proportions. Pasted to her mirror are photos of Lillian Gish, and Bette Davis in her platinum blonde phase, and the contrast of the two is entirely apropos. Surrounded by the frayed-daily decorum of her parents' home, she pretends to be the model of schoolgirl compliance; swathed in sleek black glad rags for her nightly excursions into the demimonde, Violette is a sultry cocotte with amoral delusions of glamor. Both part-time guises are fraudulent, but Violette is convinced that her future lies with her femme fatale self. She proceeds to grasp any means necessary to turn it into a full-time reality, filching money from her parents, deceiving and manipulating them to protect her cover. When their presence threatens the fulfillment of her dreams, she simply chooses to dispose of them.

According to contemporary accounts and Chabrol's film, Violette's case became a cause célèbre, the catalyst for a battle between the entrenched establishment, who deemed her a diabolical scourge of society, and

the bohemian left, who exalted her into a crusader against bourgeois repression. With glacial irony, Chabrol shows us a girl who is neither monster nor martyr; having scarcely an ideological notion in her marcelled little head, she's an example of the banality of evil if there ever was one. In typical adolescent fashion, Violette views her parents alternately as tyrants and glib fools, but what sets her apart is her unblushing single-mindedness in indulging her desires.

Throughout, the performances match Chabrol's usual high standards. Stéphane Audran and Jean Carmet are impeccable as the affectionate if obtuse parents, while in the title role, Isabelle Huppert is in every way as remarkable as she was in last year's *The Lacemaker*. On the surface the two roles are diametrically opposite, but she brings the same unerring spareness of technique to both. Beneath

Violette's petulant pout, Huppert hints at a dense interior world beyond the ken of everyone around her, just as she did with the inhibited Pomme. Chabrol uses her elusive quality to forge a character that neither begs sympathy nor demands judgment; the self-centered myopia of Violette and everyone else concerned comes through with icy clarity. Chabrol doesn't make Altman's mistake of confusing emotional detachment with mere disdain; yet this film, like so many others in this year's festival, finally pays a price for the distance its director imposes between the audience and his material. The director's restraint and control become his own subject after a while, and an enervating one at that. There's a good deal to admire about a film such as *Violette Nozière*, but once ended it doesn't leave you with very much to hold onto either. □

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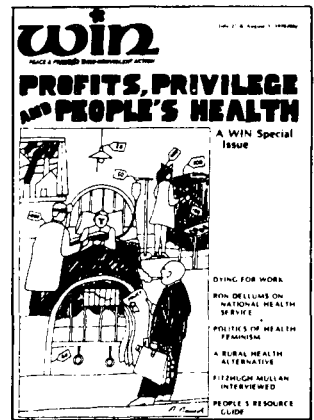
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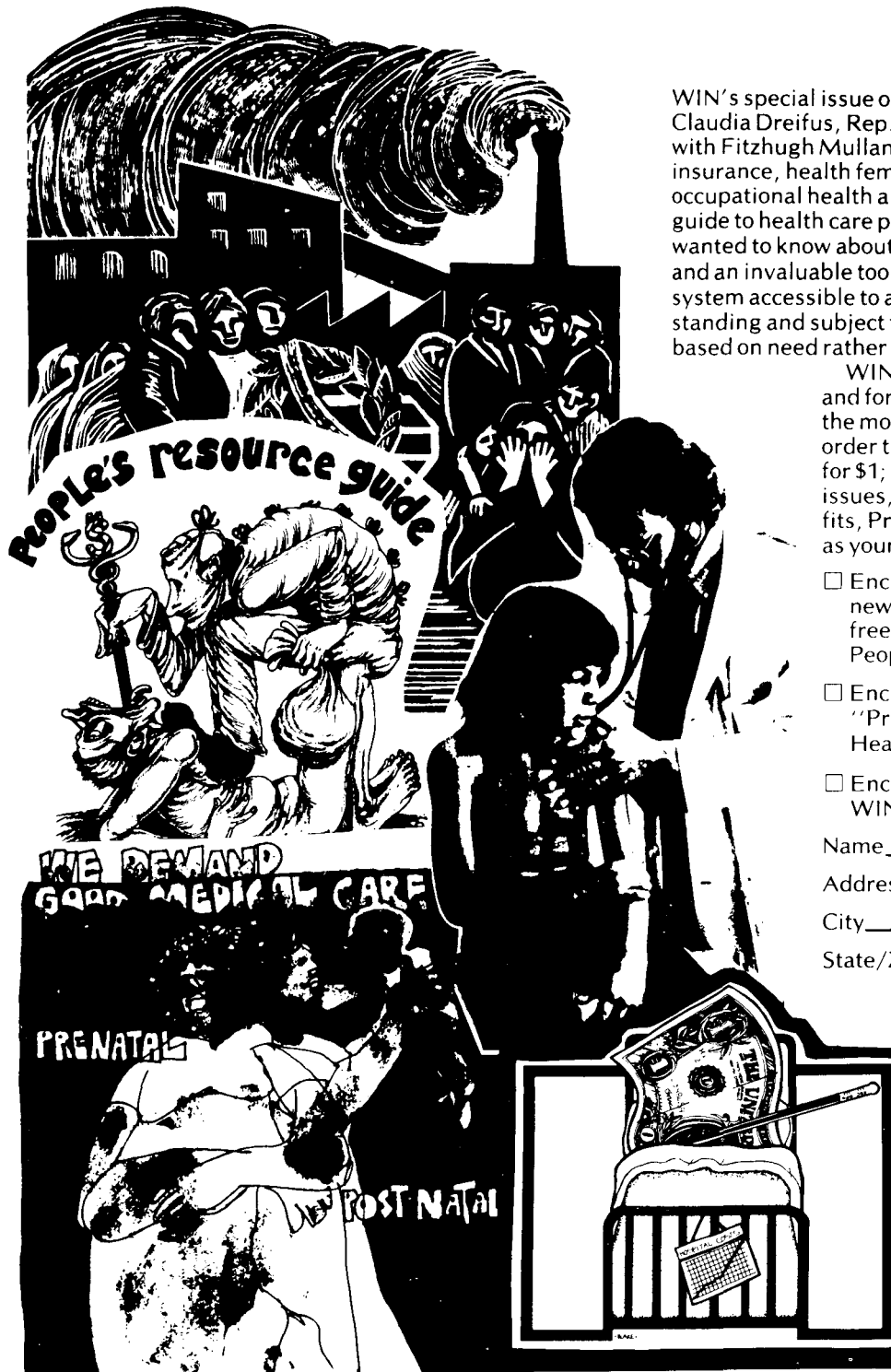
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