

THE TURNING POINT and THE GOODBYE GIRL, both directed by Herbert Ross.

The best new movies of 1943

STEPHEN HARVEY

IT DOESN'T TAKE MUCH PRESENCE of mind to realize that in the last year or so, the style and substance of American movies have been radically turned around. Almost overnight the blood-spattered nihilism of the early seventies—the appeal of which was attributed to everything from sunspots to the Imperial Presidency—has begun to seem as remote as the odes to the counterculture of the late sixties. Instead, the most influential movies lately have come out emphatically on the side of what their directors conceive to be human goodness and self-fulfillment. In movies as seemingly disparate as *Rocky* and *Star Wars*, the message is largely the same—we are not clockwork zombies, immobilized by urban anomie, cataclysms both natural and man-made, or the infernal designs of Beelzebub; we make our own destinies.

This year moviegoers have amply demonstrated their hunger for these reassuring truisms, and after a five-year siege of rampant on-screen paranoia, who can blame them? The irony is that the more these films try to keep up with the mood of the times, the further back they hearken in search of inspiration. The current crop of filmmakers is so unused to invoking the cause of humanism that it's been forced to rummage through the vaults of faded movie memories for the key. Hence *Rocky's* upbeat underdog is really just Mr. Deeds or Mr. Smith with an inner-city accent, and *Star Wars* a computerized *Buck Rogers* in stereophonic sound. Even *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* couldn't have existed if it weren't for the likes of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* a

generation ago. (As for *New York, New York*, one could go mad trying to unravel all the homages to Hollywood's *ancien régime*.) As cycles go, this one has already spawned its share of entertaining movies, but sooner or later this retrospective mania is bound to induce a crick in the neck of audiences and film-makers alike.

Consistently enough, *The Goodbye Girl* and *The Turning Point*, two highly touted winter releases, feverishly resuscitate yet another pair of bygone genres—namely, the three-hankie “women’s picture” and the screwball romantic comedy. Each betrays an almost morbid recall of archaic movie conventions, while trying to seem resolutely modern at the same time. Both were directed by the prolific Herbert Ross, which goes far to explain their limitations.

ROSS'S CAREER IS LIVING PROOF that the old adage about film being a director's medium doesn't always work out in practice. Over the last decade, Ross has divided his time largely between focusing the spotlight for divas like Barbra Streisand (*Funny Lady*, *The Owl and the Pussycat*) and dutifully transcribing onto celluloid the plays of Neil Simon (*The Sunshine Boys*), Woody Allen (*Play It Again, Sam*), and such. At best, the result has been a few serviceable, if pedestrian, vehicles for the hot property in question; at worst, Ross has simply allowed either the narcissism of the star or the proscenium archness of the script to be registered intact, photographed in a style apparently cribbed from episodes of *Love, American Style*.

Although *The Goodbye Girl* is as strident and stagy as most of the rest, Ross's usual alibis don't apply here; Richard Dreyfuss and Marsha Mason haven't the box-office clout to justify their excesses, and while Neil Simon provided the script, it was an original written directly for the screen. I use the word “original” in its loosest possible meaning, because the plot has been lifted wholesale from that charming forties comedy *The More the Merrier*, in which Jean Arthur and Joel McCrea shared a cramped Washington apartment and, despite themselves, fell in love, with an assist from that caustic old cupid, Charles Coburn. There has already been one credited remake of this story (*Walk Don't Run*, with Cary Grant in the Coburn part) transplanted to Tokyo during the Olympics; this time around, Irresistible Force (Dreyfuss) collides with Immovable Object (Mason) on New York's Upper West Side. Understandably, the carbon has gotten a little bit blurry with age, and the romantic couple's peevish bickerings over invaded turf haven't a

fraction of the comic freshness and precision of the original model. Simon's major innovations have been to make the lead characters a pair of career-frustrated performers, and to replace the elderly matchmaker with a tart-tongued child (Quinn Cummings); yet even she's just a female replica of Ellen Burstyn's sassy son from *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*. But then, the whole script is promiscuously derivative, borrowing from *A Chorus Line* (Mason's abortive dance audition), *A Thousand Clowns* (precocious kid loves childlike grown-up), ad infinitum.

Still, nobody but Simon could have written *The Goodbye Girl*—its acrid tone and shameless manipulation are unmistakable. Both writer and director are bent on disarming the audience with their characters' warmth and spontaneity, and Simon has made his usual cursory attempt to give the two main characters a facsimile of depth (rejection by one man too many has made her insecure; while underneath his bombast, Dreyfuss is as vulnerable as Mason). Yet each wayward moment of genuine feeling that threatens to surface is gunned down in the barrage of one-liners from the Master. Simon can't seem to stop himself, no matter how threadbare—or alien to the character forced to utter them—the quips get.

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LESS ENDEARING STILL IS Simon's palpable disdain for anyone unfortunate enough not to be white or heterosexual. In *The Goodbye Girl's* Simonized New York, blacks, Puerto Ricans, even Japanese car salesmen exist solely to harass those few whites plucky enough to stick it out in the big city. He reserves the heavy ammo for homosexuals, the mere mention of whom, at this late date, is still expected to provoke paroxysms of unrestrained mirth. When forced by an eccentric off-Broadway director to play Richard III as the queen of the realm, Dreyfuss vents his dismay in an endless stream of “fruit” jokes; later the heroine chimes in with the observation that what made dancing in the chorus a particular drag, was the fact that the boys in the back row had higher voices than hers. It's bad enough that Simon thinks this is funny—worse yet that we're supposed to take this as evidence of how lovable and normal these characters are.

Ross's direction and the camera work are

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perfectly in tune with the smarminess of the script. The framing of the actors is cramped and ungainly, and the photography so grainy that it's hard to make out the actors' expressions except in close-up. Perhaps to compensate, Dreyfuss and Mason carry on as if they were being forced to project every nuance to the back rows of the Shubert. The strain takes a particular toll on Mason; under more relaxed circumstances she can be a pleasant performer, but here she never tosses a line away when it can be socked home at full volume. Dreyfuss seems a bit more at ease, since frenetic abrasiveness has always been his long suit. Eventually his relentless wear down the audience's defenses as well as the heroine's, but I wish someone had spared him the effort. Anyone in the mood for a romantic comedy with spirit and humor will just have to track down a local rerun of *Annie Hall*.

The Turning Point shows off Ross's propensity for glossy star vehicles; as such it's palatable enough, but the movie hints at more than it ever comes close to delivering. Like *Julia*, the fact that it raises the subject of female friendship at all may be enough to satisfy some, considering the all but total absence of strong leading roles for women in American movies of the recent past. Again like *Julia*, *The Turning Point* is handsomely made, inoffensive and patently sincere—a pretty pallid set of virtues, even if it is more than you can say for most of the competition. Unlike the unabashed melodramas that kept Joan Crawford and Susan Hayward gainfully employed for decades, *The Turning Point* wants its pathos leavened with a dose of social consciousness, a feat more complicated than it sounds. Its plot is vintage high-forties stuff and really too synthetic to convey many hard truths, while its approach is too low-key and earnest for a real assault on the emotions. Clearly, *The Turning Point's* heroines Deedee (Shirley MacLaine) and Emma (Anne Bancroft) aren't the only ones whose priorities are a bit confused.

OF ALL THOSE VENERABLE entries in the hearth vs. career school of movies, *The Turning Point* specifically recalls Bette Davis and Miriam Hopkins's second tandem effort, *Old Acquaintance*. In that genuinely kitsch classic, intellectual Davis and lowbrow

Hopkins play girlhood chums and rival novelists who thrust and parry from youth through middle age, belatedly coming to terms with themselves and each other at the final fade-out. MacLaine is Hopkins's subdued descendant, bemoaning her thwarted chance for the limelight after 20 years of self-imposed exile in Oklahoma; gifted and ambitious à la Davis, dancer Bancroft is pirouetting into forced retirement and has nothing waiting in the wings to take the place of her vocation. Modes of self-fulfillment change with the decades; Davis and Hopkins coveted the same man, Bancroft and MacLaine the same spot in the ballet firmament. Yet in both cases the catalyst is the same—the domestic one's daughter with the flossy first name (Deirdre in *Old Acquaintance*, Emilia in *The Turning Point*), who starts out by emulating her mother's best friend, and ends up with the youthful beau (1943) or professional coup (1977) for which her idol has become too old to compete.

The Turning Point's principal departure from the mold, of course, is in its purported insider's view of the contemporary ballet scene. Its credentials on this score are undeniably impressive; director Ross is a former stage choreographer of some distinction, and the film's executive producer, Ross's wife, Nora Kaye, was herself a ballet star of legendary stature. Yet the film is pervaded with the sense of an uneasy truce between the impulse to make this milieu accessible and exciting to the masses, and the desire to depict it with fidelity. Arthur Laurents's screenplay gives lip service to the sweat and persistence required to survive in this profession; yet in true movie-movie fashion, the debuting Emilia makes it to the top quicker than you can say Natalia Makarova. This might have been excused as acceptable poetic license with someone really electric in the role, but the casting of Leslie Browne was a crucial error in judgment from every standpoint. As an actress she's neither sufficiently skilled nor appealing to make one much care about her personal or professional vicissitudes, while her dancing virtuosity falls far short of convincing any balletomane that she's worthy of Baryshnikov, who partners her in the film.

ALTHOUGH A DAZZLING ARRAY of ballet stars appears in snippets of dance during the course of the film, for the most part these vignettes are singularly uninvolved, because of the uninspired way they've been photographed—in static long shots taken too far from the stage, irritatingly punctuated with superfluous reaction shots of the audience. Baryshnikov's solos are the glorious exception; his weightless panache seems to have prompted Ross to let the camera soar in harmony with this marvel, and the effect is momentarily exhilarating.

Apart from such fleeting moments of pure pleasure, *The Turning Point* doesn't provide much more than a serviceable framework for the acting pyrotechnics of its two

co-stars. Deedee and Emma are such neatly symmetrical polar opposites, with every motivation carefully spelled out and underlined by the script, that they really don't have much substance as characters. Yet Bancroft and MacLaine invest them with such gusto that their charged interplay is always engaging to watch. Although the camera must continually cut away from Bancroft at work to preserve the illusion of her balletic mastery, off stage at least, with her sinewy frame and regal demeanor, she has the aura down cold. Her performance has a relaxed center to it quite unlike anything she's managed on screen in far too long. Much the same could be said for MacLaine's work here; gone completely are the fussy quirks of her hoyden days, replaced with a mature directness and sure sense of understatement. With an utter lack of vanity, she manages to convey the frustrated slackness of a woman who's spent too many years bending over a dishwasher instead of a practice bar; she is aided in this by the excellent costume design, which sums up the contrast between Deedee and Emma far more succinctly than does the script. Like most women stars of their vintage, Bancroft and MacLaine have had professional hurdles of their own in the last few years, and it's a pleasure to see them flex their skills again. It's a pity that what they labor so valiantly on hasn't been fresh since V-J Day. □

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