

SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER,
directed by John Badham

TELEFON, directed by
Don Siegel

Discos and détente

STEPHEN HARVEY

ALTHOUGH THE TRADITIONAL movie musical remains in a kind of limbo, dancing as metaphor for glamour and romance has resurfaced with a vengeance in a host of current films. *Roseland*'s denizens fox-trotted to triumph and frustration while the heroines of *The Turning Point* pirouetted to their respective destinies; in *Saturday Night Fever*, John Travolta and his fellow discomaniacs boogie toward fulfillment, and it's ironic that the most aggressively contemporary of these three movies should most successfully invoke that delirious old Fred-and-Ginger spirit.

More paradoxical yet is the fact that this theme has been welded to the kind of "little people"—*Mean Streets* melodrama associated with the likes of Kazan and Scorsese, and that the combination very nearly comes off. The tongue-tied, sensitive hero played by Travolta is by now a familiar kitchen-sink archetype: a self-defined failure trapped in a dead-end job, his family a parochial joke, his cronies a gaggle of Neanderthals whose idea of diversion is playing chicken on the Verrazzano Bridge, and humping and dumping a succession of compliant girls from the neighborhood. Yet on weekends Travolta is transformed; surrounded by posters of "Rocky," Pacino, and Bruce Lee, he wriggles into his patterned Nik-Nik shirts and polyester pants, preparing to stake his claim as the un-

approachable king of the local disco. Nothing disturbs his nonchalant self-absorption until from a distance he spies his Dream Girl (Karen Lynn Gorney) cavorting on the dance floor. She's had an intoxicating whiff of sophistication in Manhattan across the river, and is desperate to clean up her grammar and sweep away the traces of Bay Ridge once and for all. In true Astaire-Rogers fashion, she thinks he's just another creep with a superiority complex until they start to dance together—their checkered romance commences as they merge for a new-fangled tango while the camera swirls around them.

JUST AS WITH THE MUSICALS of yore, *Saturday Night Fever* falters a bit whenever the hero and heroine stop punishing the parquet long enough to talk to each other. With its propulsive editing, pushy camera tricks, and overamplified disco soundtrack, the film has undeni-

able momentum but isn't always sure where it's going. Perhaps to placate Travolta's teen-age tv following, at times its form is nearly as gross as the adolescent antics that constitute part of its subject. Norman Wexler's script bears down a bit on the dese-dem-dose diction of the aimless illiterates he's created, and neither he nor the film's director, John Badham, can quite decide whether to milk the milieu for easy laughs or play up the pathos of the hero's blunted aspirations. After working the audience over for nearly two hours, the film winds down to a low-key and inconclusive finale, which constitutes either confusion or a perverse form of integrity on the part of everyone concerned. Moreover, like a lot of recent movies, *Saturday Night Fever* betrays a puritanical attitude about sex. The rapport between Travolta and Gorney is supposed to be poignant because it remains an affair of the spirit rather than the flesh, while the hero's cohorts by contrast indulge in soulless gangbangs and the like; by omission, the movie implies that no form of sex exists save the sordid.

Yet I suspect that many people will be so disarmed by the dancing and Travolta's magnetism that the sur-



STEPHEN HARVEY is INQUIRY's regular film reviewer. He is coordinator of the film study program, Museum of Modern Art, New York City.

rounding chaos will hardly matter. It's a difficult transition from the intimate familiarity of television to the outsized impact of the movies, but Travolta would command the screen even if the camera didn't ogle him so shamelessly from every conceivable angle. Audiences have responded to this combination of ethnic bravado and mute sensibility ever since the early Brando; although I think the boyish, moist-eyed obtuseness Travolta projects may limit him in the future, he has the panache of a born film personality and the uncluttered technique of a promising actor as well. In support, a young actress named Donna Pascow does extremely skilled work as the pudgy, raccoon-eyed girl Travolta casually rejects for his partner once her rival glides haughtily into view, while Gorney is attractively brittle even if she clearly has labored as hard to acquire those fractured consonants as her character does to discard them. As a study of teen-age malaise in the big city, *Saturday Night Fever* is no more sharp-witted than its protagonist, but it's easily the most efficiently tooled launching pad for a new star since *Rocky*.

NEVER LET IT BE SAID that even the glossiest American movies exist in a political vacuum, untouched by the course of world events. The Christmas arrival of *Telefon*, the latest Charles Bronson vehicle, proves that whatever the politics of détente may have wrought on a more cosmic plane, it certainly has dealt a mortal blow to that venerable Hollywood staple, the cold-war political thriller. Traditionally, films of international intrigue have pivoted on the conflict between the ideological forces of light and darkness; but times have changed, and the present lethargic truce between two varying shades of gray is hardly the stuff that gut-wrenching celluloid tension is made of. Thanks to this lulling state of affairs, moviemakers who dote on topical melodrama have been forced to take some pretty desperate measures in order to keep the old genre going—to name two, the resuscitation of those old nemeses, the Nazis (*Marathon Man* and the forthcoming *The Boys From Brazil*), and the feeble exploitation of their cinematic successors in terror, the PLO (*Black Sunday*).

Now that we're on relatively civil terms with the Soviet Union, *Telefon* seems almost nostalgic for the iron-curtain conflicts of yore, here updated

Traditionally, films of international intrigue have pivoted on the conflict between the ideological forces of light and darkness; but times have changed.

with a mildly ingenious plot device: While the enemy's goal is, once again, the sabotage of our national security, the culprit (the inevitable Donald Pleasence) is a Stone Age Stalinist, and his heroic pursuer a Brezhnev-era comrade (Bronson) pledged to maintain the fragile status quo between the two superpowers at all costs. The CIA meanwhile monitors the whole business in a bemused fashion; neither it nor the KGB deems it necessary to disturb their respective chief executives with a report of the potential menace involved. In fact, the only discernible differences between the two are that the KGB brass inhabit dank czarist palaces, wear gray serge uniforms and speak with impeccable British accents.

Despite this new twist reflecting the political complacency of the seventies, on the whole *Telefon* doesn't exactly radiate originality. With a faint nod to *The Manchurian Candidate* and a firm wink at that B-picture sci-fi gem *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (directed, like *Telefon*, by Don Siegel), Pleasence's pawns of destruction are brainwashed hollow shells masquerading as prosaic middle-Americans—zombies from Moscow rather than pods from outer space.

COMPARED TO HIS DIRTY Harry of a few years ago, Siegel seems to have mellowed considerably; *Telefon* may well be a lot less morally reprehensible, but it's also conspicuously lacking in the *frisson* department. Pleasence has embodied demented malevolence in so many flaccid thrillers that by now the sight of this poached-egg-on-Milquetoast waddling from phone booth to phone booth to unleash his minions provokes, at most, an occasional guffaw. Siegel and his

scenarists, Stirling Silliphant and Peter Hyams, haven't even the wit to arouse the audience by putting Bronson and the ever chipper Lee Remick, his American liaison, into some dire state of personal peril, however temporary. At the same time, it's hard to get particularly exercised over all those photogenic explosions of defense plants, army installations, and the like, which we're repeatedly told are no longer of much security value to the on-screen Establishment in any event.

Siegel does fitfully manage to juice things up with a few well-edited set pieces in such novel locales as the gelid cityscapes of Helsinki (standing in for Moscow and points East) and the *outré* atrium of Houston's Hyatt House Hotel.

Bronson isn't very much help either; as the screen's favorite age-creased, weary loner endowed with submerged passions and flinty reflexes, he's increasingly reminiscent of Sinatra toward the end of his film career—which is no compliment. Bronson's main concession to verisimilitude as a Russian undercover agent has been to smile even less often than usual while diligently ar-ti-cu-lat-ing every sparse syllable. To be fair, his lethargy is perfectly in keeping with the rest of the film; like most of its recent predecessors, *Telefon* is a multi-million-dollar wrong number. □

CLASSIFIED

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING RATES: \$0.25 PER word, minimum insertion \$5.00. Six to 11 insertions: 10 percent off; 12 or more insertions: 20 percent off. Payment must accompany insertion order: INQUIRY, 1700 Montgomery St., San Francisco, CA 94111.

Travel

DAYTRIPS IN EUROPE FOR PEOPLE WHO LOVE to walk! Visit fascinating places at low cost using our unique travel guides. For free information write Great Trips, Box 5199-I, New York, NY 10017.

Publications

INCOME TAX CANNOT BE COLLECTED UNLESS you allow IRS to violate your rights. "How Millions Have Legally Stopped Paying Income Tax"—\$10—is your blue print to financial freedom. Return for refund if not pleased. Hope Press, Box 60386-I, Oklahoma City, OK 73103.

PHILOLOGOS—PRIVATE NEWSLETTER OF libertarian commentary and satirical speculation. Sample \$0.50, 12 issues \$5.00. OEHI, Box 2586, Tallahassee, FL 32304.

Situation Wanted

ENGINEER, 55, RELIABLE. WANTS WORK AS caretaker, property manager, historical restoration, or other, in exchange for place to live and modest compensation. Box 676, Waynesville, NC 28786.