

kind of people who get involved in the psychiatric game—psychiatrists, patients, and the families of patients—and few of them come up smelling good.

Ezra Pound is another sterling example of the character of many psychiatric inmates. Pound was caught by the Allies in Italy toward the end of World War II and returned to the United States, charged with treason for making pro-Fascist radio broadcasts in Italy. In order to avoid a politically embarrassing trial, the United States government opted to have Pound declared insane. The psychiatrists testifying for the state were, as usual, on the side of the state, and Pound was committed to St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, D.C., a federal psychiatric facility in the tradition of large, inhumane state mental hospitals. Poet Charles Olson, reporting on a visit to Pound at the hospital, is more aware than most of the complexity of Pound's relationship to his psychiatrists. He is disgusted by Pound's Nazi-like attacks on Jews and Jewish doctors when Jews are the ones trying to help him out. He marvels that Pound uses the same "medical nonsense" as Hitler to declare the Jews inferior. But Olson himself seems unaware of the irony in the fact that similar "medical nonsense" is being used against Pound himself in declaring him "mentally ill."

Even the psychiatric reformers don't come off too well when their statements are closely examined. Liberal psychiatrist David Viscott complains mightily about the abuse of a young patient under his care who is kept in the hospital against Viscott's wishes in order to serve as a research subject. Yet Viscott fails to condemn involuntary treatment in principle, and fails to take a stand on the side of his patient when his own career is placed in jeopardy.

I myself can make no claim to sainthood when, as a psychiatric resident-in-training, I was placed in situations similar to Viscott's. I was vociferous enough in criticizing many aspects of psychiatric treatment, and I spoke out in principle against involuntary treatment. I also did my best to avoid coercing my patients. But when my career was on the line, I did not refuse absolutely to participate in any of the activities I had criticized. Had I taken such a stand, I would have been fired, as one of my friends was fired. Psychiatry brooks no criticism. Psychiatry is a corrupt and corrupting institution, as *Blue Jolts* documents in poignant detail. □

# F I L M

**PRETTY BABY, directed by Louis Malle.**

## Directing at a distance

STEPHEN HARVEY

IT'S AN ODD PARADOX THAT a director as gifted as Louis Malle has never received the attention he deserves for precisely the same reason his work is so intriguing—namely, his almost perverse versatility. Too many film aficionados prize above all those filmmakers whose favorite subject is their own tired old psyches unreel year after year; certainly Malle's more noted New Wave confreres have, for better or worse, favored variations on the same themes which animated their youthful triumphs. Consistency, however, is one thing Malle has never been accused of, and with reason. After the woozy eroticism of his first success, *The Lovers*, Malle turned to knockabout surrealism with *Zazie*. Since then he's forayed into existentialism (*The Fire Within*), antic vaudeville (*Viva Maria*), Truffaut-esque bourgeois chronicles (*Murmur of the Heart*), and murky allegory (*Black Moon*), plus one somber elegy on the vicissitudes of history (*Lacombe, Lucien*)—not to mention an occasional distinguished detour into documentary (*Phantom India, Calcutta*).

Malle's willingness to take chances is what makes each new film of his such an event; still, I can't honestly say I've been awaiting his latest with breathless anticipation. *Pretty Baby* marks Malle's English-language film debut, as well as his first American production, and the precedents already set this year by Bergman and Wertmüller have been rather daunting, to say the least. If anything, the French have found the moviemaking climate here particularly

unpropitious—at one time or another, directors from Varda and Demy to Lelouch and Bourguignon have each traversed the Atlantic and here met their celluloid Waterloos. One after another must have felt that the challenge of beating this apparent jinx was too tempting to pass up, but the result wasn't often worth the effort expended. Curiously enough, with *Pretty Baby* Malle seems to have capitulated before the first camera was turned. Although his meticulous technique is abundantly in evidence, the film is so distanced and emotionally muddled that it gives the appearance of having been directed in absentia.

While *Pretty Baby*'s subject—the nurturing of a 12-year-old prostitute in World War I New Orleans—is pretty audacious stuff, for Malle it's not really such a radical departure. A detached curiosity about the travails of adolescence, sexual and otherwise, has surfaced before in his work, always filtered through the cool sensuality of his images. Malle has never bothered to assume a stern moral tone when it comes to the nether reaches of eros. Although it now seems a bit quaint, 20 years ago *The Lovers* was considered pretty scabrous indeed, both for its soft-core explicitness and for the implied message that an adulterous affair was probably the best thing that ever happened to the film's heroine (played by Jeanne Moreau). In *Murmur of the Heart*, Malle even managed to make the notion of mother-son incest seem rather sweet and cozy.

Yet if *Pretty Baby* really does resemble any of his past work, it comes closest to *Lacombe, Lucien*. Just as with the teen-aged Nazi collaborator in that film, the fate of the nymphette Violet in *Pretty Baby* is entirely shaped by circumstance. The bordello is the only world she's ever known, and it is one in which childhood is merely a long stage wait before the material rewards of puberty finally begin to arrive. Thus, it's only natural for Violet to while away her life longing for the day when she can successfully vie with Mommy for the favors of the Johns downstairs.

We've already seen a modern-day treatment of this character via Jodie Foster's Iris in Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*. But while Iris joined the game to find

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NORMAN DOUSINEAU

affection, Violet is too self-absorbed for that—what she's after is adulation. Malle's sole triumph in *Pretty Baby*—a not inconsiderable one—is his detailed portrait of this petulant child with illusions of trollopy maturity. Moreover, the casting of a preteen model named Brooke Shields for the title role was an inspiration. Shields's lush, dark eyebrows, angular cheekbones, and rosebud mouth make her the most ravishing child-woman the movies have seen since the teenaged Elizabeth Taylor, and there's something almost frighteningly genuine about the sluttish self-confidence which sparks every move she makes on screen. Together she and Malle create moments of real quicksilver insight—for instance, her squeal of delight, followed by a pose of affronted hauteur, when her most persistent admirer presents her with a porcelain doll.

**I**T'S A PITY THAT THE FILM which surrounds Shields's intricate character turned out to be so inert. The script, taken loosely from autobiographical accounts of the period, was written by Polly Platt, heretofore known for her art direction on four of Peter Bogdanovich's projects. As a screenwriter, Platt makes a terrific production designer. The movie spends an inordinate amount of time exploring the tatty, brown-hued opulence of Violet's pleasure palace, to the detriment of the tenuous plot and the development

of the characters. As Violet's avid, wide-eyed mother, Susan Sarandon is at least lively as she pouts, drawls, and flounces about like some Tennessee Williams ingenue, but her energy only underscores the anemic languor that seems to have afflicted everyone else concerned with the film, Malle included. He pauses so frequently for long close-ups of purportedly significant gestures or bits of decor that all momentum is dissipated, while his performers dawdle over the dialogue as though they were as unfamiliar with the idiom as he presumably is. For all the footage lavished on them, the assembled *filles de joie* have scarcely a distinguishing trait between them (apart from a Teutonic type named Frieda who has far too many), while Frances Faye plays the absinthe-drenched dreadnought who runs the place rather like Mae West without comic timing.

The most glaring offender (or victim) is Keith Carradine, whose acting range seems to diminish with each successive film. Carradine's Bellocq is a sexually repressed photographer who is captivated by Violet; otherwise, his life is spent in quest of that exact gradation of light which will transform the jaded doxies into blossoming odalisques. The intention is to make Bellocq somewhat enigmatic to the viewer, but on the evidence of Carradine's fixed repertoire of damp stares it's the actor who finds him so. The character comes off as a faded tintype of all those sensitive weaklings

out of the pages of authors from Maugham through Nabokov, hoisted with the petard of their misdirected lusts. The movie briefly turns promising—if only because the locale changes temporarily—when Violet decides to play house with this combination father figure, lover, and Pygmalion, but it all disintegrates into a straight-faced send-up of *Of Human Bondage*, with Violet naughtily smashing Bellocq's photographic plates while he stands by looking pained.

It all might have had some purpose if Malle had opted for irony or emphasized the queasy horror inherent in the subject, but in the end *Pretty Baby* doesn't even have the courage of its perversions. Having seized upon such a sensational topic, Malle shies away from its more lurid implications—the movie is a sly tease from the very first shot, in which Violet is seen utterly fascinated as an offscreen woman moans with what seems to be ecstasy but eventually turns out to be labor pains. The movie's peculiar chasteness may have been motivated in part by practical considerations; even nowadays a movie dealing graphically with pedophilia might have trouble getting released, at least by a major studio like Paramount. Yet I suspect that the real reason has more to do with Malle's glacial detachment toward his material, a quality which he's always had but probably never to such a pronounced degree. Without any overt editorializing, his camera manages to record the sequence in which Violet is literally served up on a platter to the highest bidder, then retreats discreetly into a hallway during the act of consummation—after all, how could *that* be captured dispassionately? Many people will be understandably relieved at *Pretty Baby*'s relative circumspection, but there's something truly exploitative about the pose of objectivity Malle has assumed here. If the film has one underlying thesis it is that all moral values are relative to the situation, and it's far easier to sway audiences on that score when they're not forced to witness a climactic March-December clinch.

Although the film's flaccid rhythms might have been remedied if Malle had been working in his own language, I doubt that his viewpoint would have proved clearer under any circumstances. The most heartening thing about *Pretty Baby* is the fact that, based on his past record, Malle's next project is bound to be something entirely different. □

## Smiles of a winter's night

THOMAS RUSSELL III

**T**HE NEW YORK CITY BAL-  
let's winter season is rarely its  
most interesting. A month of  
*Nutcrackers* takes its toll on audience  
interest and company energy. It's a  
grand ballet, a city tradition—last  
year's mid-December musician's  
strike, timed to hit the company where  
it would hurt the hardest, was viewed  
popularly as a strike against Christ-  
mas, even a plot against children. *The  
Nutcracker* does give younger members  
of the company easy access to a variety  
of roles—something that rarely hap-  
pens in a single ballet in the same  
season—and it is the easiest possible  
introduction to ballet for thousands of  
bright-eyed little girls and their  
grumpy but obliging mothers. But a  
dancer's lifeblood is his or her training  
in, and experience of performing,  
many works in a variety of styles. Any  
ballet performed as a company's ex-  
clusive fare for some 40 performances  
(imagine an opera company giving a  
similar run of *Aidas*!) can only lead to  
hardening of the arteries all around.

In a sense, *The Nutcracker*, although  
it's their bread and butter, is an  
anomaly for the company. The City  
differs from most traditional ballet  
companies, which tend to function  
more or less as museums for the  
classic, mainly Russian, ballets. In-  
stead, the City thrives on new work,  
particularly on the outpourings of its  
prolific director, the great George  
Balanchine. Trained in the classic  
Russian court tradition, often a neo-

classicist, Balanchine is still most cen-  
trally a modernist; indeed, Hilton  
Kramer has said that since the death of  
Stravinsky and Picasso, Balanchine is  
the only indisputably great living art-  
ist in any medium.

Because of *The Nutcracker*, this  
seemed to be a season of consolidation  
more than of any major advance. In  
general, the dancers shone in roles in  
which they had always excelled. And  
some of the most difficult works (like  
*The Four Temperaments*) seemed to elicit  
the company's best. Last year's *Vienna  
Waltzes* already looks underenergized,  
however, and thus even sillier than it  
used to; it seems an exercise in ram-  
pant pictorialism, and one wonders  
why Balanchine did it. That kind of  
"visual beauty" is not what ballet is  
about; a fleet of sailboats is more  
graceful, and ultimately more interest-  
ing. But even in a confection like  
Balanchine's *Tzigane*, a holdover from  
the Ravel festival a few years back,  
Suzanne Farrell has sharpened her  
characterization of the vicious little  
soubrette to enlarge both her seduc-  
tiveness and menace. Farrell's part-  
ner, Peter Martins, has risen to match  
her. He's the only one in the company  
who's unquestionably man enough for  
her.

In fact, the Farrell-Martins team  
has come in recent years to represent  
many of the strengths of the NYCB,  
including the perfection of its classicism  
and its unity as a company. A useful  
comparison is between City's produc-  
tion of Jerome Robbins's *Other Dances*  
and that of the American Ballet  
Theatre. Robbins originally choreo-  
graphed the ballet for ABT, and  
specifically for Baryshnikov and  
Makarova. But despite the Russian  
dancers' acknowledged greatness, and  
even though they trained together with  
the Kirov and are still friends, they  
never quite made a partnership. They  
are still two individual stars, while  
Farrell and Martins make a couple.  
One suspects that this is mainly be-  
cause of Martins. His approach to the  
role is gallant, even self-sacrificing.  
But since Martins is the most electrify-  
ingly gorgeous male dancer before the  
public today, the sacrifice may be  
easier. He has more presence and  
strength even in repose than anyone

I've seen on the stage; he certainly  
must know that he could attract the  
audience's full attention whenever he  
wanted to by doing nothing more than  
standing up straight.

At any rate, like a blocker in foot-  
ball, who must have a sixth sense for  
the position and direction of the run-  
ner behind him, Martins must antici-  
pate his partner's needs with hair-  
breadth accuracy. Knowing when to  
support his partner, how much sup-  
port to give her, where to catch her  
after a blind leap—these are a great  
male dancer's skills. In a sense, Mar-  
tins's ability is ultimately most impor-  
tant as inspiration to Farrell's  
confidence—her speed and accuracy  
are only enabled by a phenomenal  
trust that her partner will be there  
when she needs him. And, for Farrell,  
only Martins can create that trust.  
(Some years ago, Eric Porter and Ian  
Holm had a climactic duel in a Shake-  
speare play, a duel that involved a  
mace and chain. Porter told an inter-  
viewer that he and Holm were so at-  
tuned that he could swing his weapon  
to within half an inch of Holm's face  
and know by Holm's reaction whether

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to draw back, or whether it was safe to  
get even closer.) Such a high degree of  
trust is essential for a leading couple in  
ballet, and Farrell and Martins con-  
vince me they have more of it than any  
other pair. It creates a particular kind  
of oneness that makes an otherwise  
minor ballet like *Other Dances*—  
another Chopin piano ballet—so  
enthraling. The dance is not a ballet  
about a combination of steps; it com-  
municates the various possibilities im-  
plicit in the idea of partnership itself.

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