

# Not So Funny

JAMES A. MAXWELL

**D**IRECTOR Richard Lester seems to be a perverse theatrical alchemist with the power to convert stage gold into movie lead. I first became aware of his odd prowess about a year ago when I saw his filmed version of *The Knack*. As a play, *The Knack* was an excellent, offbeat comedy that achieved legitimate laughter through imaginatively funny situations and sound characterization. After Lester had loaded the motion picture with dubious sight gags and enough trick cuts for six "underground" movies, the sharp ring of the original was reduced to the plop of a dropped pancake.

But his reverse black magic wasn't really tested until he directed *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. Making a vapid movie from this highly successful musical required alchemy of a high order, but Lester was up to the challenge.

All the ingredients were there for a twenty-four-carat production. The scenario writer, often the culprit when such undertakings fail, was not at fault in this instance. The hilarious, bawdy script about coniving slaves, courtesans, and philandering husbands in early Rome was taken from the stage version without serious tampering. The cast contains some of our best contemporary clowns: Zero Mostel as the freedom-loving slave Pseudolus, the role he originated on Broadway; Phil Silvers as the keeper of the brothel, Jack Gifford as the fawning slave; and the late Buster Keaton as the bewildered father in search of his kidnapped son and daughter. Surrounding the central characters are some of the most beautiful and scantily dressed females ever to step before a camera. The sprightly music has been retained. How could such a combination go wrong?

There are at least two major difficulties that are immediately apparent, and both are in the province of the director. The first has to do

with timing. In scene after scene, the comedy possibilities are dissipated because the episode is permitted to go on much too long. What should have been fresh and crisp becomes limp simply from overexposure. There is, for example, one wild chase segment that starts off being gloriously funny, but by the time it ends—hours later, it seemed to me—the whole business had become as tedious as waiting for the heroine to die in one of Wagner's operas.

The second comedy-killer is there because some of the actors are permitted to give broad stage performances before the camera which is basically an intimate medium. Scenes that would be exactly right to a patron sitting in the tenth row of a legitimate theatre seem grossly overplayed in closeup shots on film. Through much of the movie, the spectator feels as if the actors are giving him a poke in the ribs with each sally to be certain he isn't missing the joke.

I yield to no man in my admiration for the comic talents of Zero Mostel on stage. But he needs con-

siderably more control than he received in the filmed *Forum* to be equally effective on the screen. His bulbous eyes, for instance, are one of his greatest assets in the theatre. However, when he uses them on camera as if he were playing to the back row of the balcony, the result is unnerving rather than funny. It is no accident that the two comedians who come off best are Phil Silvers and Buster Keaton, a pair of movie veterans.

**A**CCORDING to the program I received, producer Melvin Frank's order to the *Forum* company on the first day of shooting was, "If it isn't funny, forget it." I have the feeling that Lester took the command too seriously. Comedy does not respond well to pounding, and actors are not necessarily funnier because the director works them into a froth. Until Richard Lester becomes convinced of these simple truths, any number of good stage plays are in danger of going through the same unhappy chemical transformation as *Forum*.

## Winter

When only the fog comes over the hill,  
on the first day, snuffing the background out,  
the near tree is clear against gray air.  
An arm, a fan, the delicate dark network  
of three large branches shredding themselves finer and finer—  
the infinite distinctions pronounced  
most clearly.

The next morning, snow.  
And all the way up to the woods,  
ruts and tracks and yesterday's lost trees are traced.  
Where the truck and the tractor turned,  
where the chipmunks ran all fall,  
the routes are established.

It is all very clear,  
every shape, path and the crossing color of birds.  
If there was ever a time to see, to look out,  
now

is the time or  
if the weather holds for the day  
then when definition gives way  
to this one white slowly  
raising its question  
Where were you going, what were you looking for?

—JON SWAN

# Instincts and Prophecies

GEORGE H. T. KIMBLE

**ON AGGRESSION**, by Konrad Lorenz. Translated by Marjorie Kerr Wilson. *Harcourt, Brace & World*. \$5.75.

**THE TERRITORIAL IMPERATIVE**, by Robert Ardrey. *Atheneum*. \$6.95.

It would almost look as though the children of this world have been wiser in their generation than the rest of us. For it is they who have believed all along that animals not only behave like people but are people, with the same hates and loves, fears and frustrations, needs and interests. (Only the other day, a three-year-old of our acquaintance was heard to say of a line-up of twittering swallows on a telephone wire that "they must be having a meeting.") Now their beliefs are beginning to get some backing from the children of light, notably from those who call themselves ethologists.

Although the study of innate behavior patterns in animals (the subject matter of ethology) goes back to the turn of the century, it was not until the 1930's, when Konrad Lorenz in Austria and Niko Tinbergen in Holland became interested in the field, that it gained much attention. Even today it is not as well known or as well regarded on this side of the Atlantic as in Europe. Why this should be so is a little obscure, since there are at least one hundred psychologists and animal biologists in North America for every one of each on the Continent. Perhaps Mr. Ardrey, who has a good nose for scent, is on the track of something when he complains that "American psychologists pursue their studies of learning almost as if instinct did not exist" and that American anthropologists are still dominated by the Franz Boas school, which holds that the power of instinctual drives has gradually withered away in the course of human evolution.

Be this as it may, things ought to look up for the ethologists quite a bit if the two books under review

get the lasting attention they deserve. Certainly there is every reason for both of them to enjoy a large market. Both authors carry their erudition lightly. Both know how to spin a good story, and they spin plenty. Both appreciate the importance of change of pace and scene, and seldom, if ever, overestimate the layman's attention span. Both books are hard to put down—almost as hard as anything that came from the pen of Beatrix Potter. Here and there, they read like Beatrix Potter. Dr. Lorenz tells us in one place that when he asked a colleague why the faithful-unto-death type of marriage should be so rare among certain geese, she replied: "What do you expect? After all, geese are only human!" Though at times each of them comes pretty close to settling for original sin, cheerfulness keeps breaking through: the teeth can be pulled, the claws pared. Each has a happy ending.

**T**HERE ARE, naturally, differences between the two books. Dr. Lorenz is first and last an outstanding scientist who has spent more than thirty years doing "clinical" work on the behavior of every kind of animal he could lay his hands upon—from lizards to Greylag geese—most of it with a view to understanding the role of intraspecific aggression (that is, aggression among members of a given species), and the means employed by the great "constructors" of evolutionary progress, selection and mutation, to divert it into harmless channels. He is also a poet, with the poet's eye and pen and reverence.

Dr. Lorenz is a prophet too, as most poets are. In his last chapter he asks the reader to believe that he is being "far from presumptuous" when he professes his conviction that "in the very near future not only scientists, but the majority of tolerably intelligent people, will consider

as an obvious and banal truth all that has been said in [his] book about instincts in general and intraspecific aggression in particular, about phylogenetic and cultural ritualization, and about the factors that build up the ever-increasing danger of human society's becoming completely disintegrated by the misfunctioning of social behavior patterns."

Mr. Ardrey is first and foremost a playwright who has had his share of Broadway fame and fortune. But being this kind of "specialist in human nature," as he puts it, he has long "sheltered a conviction" that the anthropologists, biologists, and psychologists have something to say about man. In his *African Genesis* he put down some of the things anthropologists had been saying (to a hitherto rather small audience) about "the increasing evidence for man's evolutionary nature." In this volume, he follows up with "a close shot," a single aspect of human behavior that he believes to be characteristic of our species as a whole—one "shaped but not determined by environment and experience. . . . a consequence not of human choice but of evolutionary inheritance." Man, like most other animals, is nothing for Ardrey if not a territorial species, and the behavior pattern that he calls "territory," or the instinctive protection of "property rights," evolved, so he believes, as "a kind of defense mechanism, as nature's most effective answer to a variety of problems of survival." In other words, he is concerned with the receiving end, whereas Konrad Lorenz is concerned with the giving end, of nature's strategy for survival.

There is nothing defensive about Ardrey's stance, though. On the contrary, he is full of fight and simply cannot understand why there hasn't already been a bloody battle between those who stand for the primacy of culture and those who stand for the primacy of inheritance. Such a battle he may yet live to see, if enough people read what he has to say about the folly of supposing that poverty has anything to do with crime, that escalation can do anything but increase the determination of the defenders of Vietnam to turn back the intruders,