St. Valentine in the Dyeworks

GERALD WEALES

FARCE is a way of coping. In one of its most popular manifestations, it turns a perennial innocent loose on the world and lets him, by his inability to give the correct responses to accepted stimuli, destroy restrictive institutions and ideas. On the most obvious level, Jerry Lewis has made a career of playing that fool. Valentine Brose, the hero of Henry Livings's *Eh?*, is of that sainted company, but the Livings play has made the implicit rebellion of farce explicit. Happily, both the playwright and the players at Circle in the Square in Greenwich Village do so without losing the laughter that belongs to the genre.

Livings's innocent is not all that innocent. The other characters in the play accuse him variously of cunning and imbecility and he never denies either accusation; in fact, he sometimes borrows their words to describe himself. The audience presumably is to remain somewhat confused on that point, too, but in Dustin Hoffman's remarkable performance a strange smile, half smirk and half surprise, flits across his face. Both the performance and the movement of the play suggest that Brose is as purposefully eccentric as the Madwoman of Chaillot. Not that he otherwise resembles that elegant lady. Rouben Ter-Arutunian dresses him in what I take to be Carnaby Street run mad, a three-handed tug-of-war in which the clashing colors of his suit, shirt, and tie try to prevail.

Hoffman plays Brose as a cross between a track entrant waiting for the starting gun and a mystic listening to interior instructions. The actor has mastered that lovely old vaudeville lean in which the body becomes a rigid line forever on the slant while the audience waits for the performer to pitch forward on his face. With Hoffman, however, the device is not simply a joke but an image of Brose. The audience is never sure whether he is about to plunge into action or has fallen asleep leaning on the air. Livings lets him speak in non sequiturs and echoes of the other characters (both standard farce verbal gags), but Hoffman, depending on his tone of voice, can suggest stupidity or mockery. This Valentine Brose becomes a fit opponent for the powers that confront him when he takes a job in the boiler room of a dyeworks where all he has to do is check gauges, oil the wheels, and push a button, to see that steam is fed into the plant and not black smoke into the atmosphere.

I have heard *Eh?* described as still another confrontation between the little man and the machines he cannot cope with, but—although there are elements of that theme in some of the gags involving Brose and the machinery—that seems the least important thing in the Livings play. What Brose is forced to confront are conventional attitudes of mind. Almost every one of the characters at some point in the play, always in the midst of an extended and passionate explanation, is stopped cold by an apparently innocuous remark of Brose's and forced to ask "Eh?" The titular question contains in it both the surprise that there are other possibilities and the incipient chaos that, by the end of the play, will shatter the certainties. Mr. Price, the works manager, speaks for the factory, for the system in which the end is mechanical efficiency, a full head of steam: "When will someone invent me a man?" Dana Elcar plays him with a full head of steam, human, not mechanical, a comic performance in the slow-burn tradition of the late Edgar Kennedy. From the beginning, it is clear that the managerial Price, all rationality and good sense, is at the mercy of the simplest suggestion from his psychologizing personnel manager. Inevitably he is no match for Brose, who keeps backing him into one role after another.

Brose also tangles with the personnel manager, Mrs. Murray; a clergyman from the Smoke Abatement Society; and his own bride, whom he brings to live in the boiler room. Mrs. Murray is a comic stereotype, the psychology-spouting social worker, just waiting to release the id from the damper of jargon that she has placed over it. Such a character (see *A Thousand Clowns*) is ordinarily played with a physical awkwardness that complements the mind set. Elizabeth Wilson in the role is all angularity, sometimes jackknifing to the side so that her hip points as much as her insistent and teaching finger does; there is, for all the sharpness, a kind of fluidity that suggests, as in the scene in which she and Brose turn tension-releasing yells into a kind of insane duet, that she is ready to flow if she can find a channel.

The Reverend Mort, who is always on the watch to see that no black smoke is released, turns out to be half in love with the dragons of nameless fear to which religion gives labels, hoping thus to bury what ought to be hidden. The vicar's knocking down of Brose and even his skipping walk indicate how the dragons will rise again. The wife simply wants Brose to be a man, her man, and as she makes clear in her first scene, she will have a man even if she has to be one herself.

AT THE END of the play, just as the forces seem to have defeated Brose, the mushrooms he has been trying to cultivate suddenly spring up, and he turns Mort and Price on with a little psychedelic snack. Their release, illustrated by their skipping exit, presumably goes for Mrs. Murray and Brose's Betty as well. Brose then destroys the machinery and settles down with his predecessor to explain what he has done. As I remember it, some of the reviews when the play opened assumed that Brose's last bit with the machinery represents the destruction of the world, but—even though there are lines early in the play about implicit destruction in the machinery—that seems not at all the effect. "Do you like happy endings?" Brose asks as he begins his final explanation, and we are given one. As in the best tradition of farce, the audience moves with the fool through a laugh-filled world in which the most restrictive walls come tumbling down. The world of farce is surely a reflection of the real world. Eh?

Humdrum Epic

ROBERT SKLAR

FILM MAKERS and stars from France, Germany, and the United States have cordially collaborated in turning a dramatic moment of history—the struggle for Paris in August, 1944—into an unreal and unexciting motion picture.

Is Paris Burning? qualifies unmistakably, however, as an attempt at art. Gore Vidal wrote the screenplay with Francis Ford Coppola, René Clément of *Forbidden Games* directed it, Maurice Jarre wrote the music, and Paul Graetz produced it. But *Is Paris Burning?* fails as art, and artistic failure is often instructive. In this case failure serves as proof that film makers can botch a history book as easily as they can a novel or a play.

The film is named after the recent best-seller from which it was taken. Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre, authors of the book, told in popular, dramatized fashion how Hitler's orders to destroy the city were never carried out. The film makers adhered to the book with surprising fidelity, far more than their peers willingly give real works of literature. But novels have served as hoary staples for moviemakers ever since *The Birth of a Nation*; history books pose quite different problems for the film, problems that are worth looking into.

Past events in themselves provide no drama. After all, we already know how they turned out. What makes history exciting is the play of character and motive. The historian must be an artist, telling not only what people did but also weaving in among the events an explanation of why they did it.

Collins and Lapierre are journalists rather than artists, but in telling how Paris was saved from German dynamite and bombs, they gave their story a dramatic center by focusing on the German commander, General Dietrich von Choltitz, and his decision not to carry out his orders. But they tried as well to suggest how a vast array of human motives and choices also played a role in the outcome, and they accomplished this, ironically, by borrowing a movie method—the technique of montage, of short, rapidly shifting scenes.

VIDAL, Clément, and Graetz began their work without a theory on transforming history into film, but quite clearly they could have used one. The primary difficulty they faced in turning dramatic historical writing into dramatic movie scenes is that motives and character can no longer be explained; they must be shown and acted. Failing this, the film makers might have dropped the idea of making a dramatic historical film and tried instead to create an epic film, where the pathos and splendor of the historical event itself provide excitement, rather than the drama of character.

Frédéric Rossif's recent documentary of the Spanish Civil War, *To Die in Madrid,* partially succeeded as an epic film. The trouble with even so good a documentary as *To Die in Madrid* is that it straddles the fence between epic and drama—between re-creating the historical event and providing an explanation for it.

What can compare with movies as a medium for creating the epic, broad, outward sense of life? The audacity and bravery of many cameramen lifts the viewer from his seat and sets him down in the middle of the scene. In *To Die in Madrid* the viewer takes part in an advance with Franco's infantry, runs through the streets of Guernica as the bombs begin to fall, rides the train carrying the International Brigades out of Barcelona. You participate: history falls away, and you live in the past as if it were present, share in the sense of an unknown future.

But the narrator still speaks. He explains what is going on, why it comes out one way and not another. You return to your seat, a wall grows up between you and the scene. The viewer after all is no more than a distant spectator at events from the irretrievable past. Despite the inherent advantage of the visual medium, documentary films like *To Die in Madrid* fail to sustain the breadth and immediacy of a historical epic.

THE BOOK *Is Paris Burning?* does possess a certain breadth and immediacy through its montage technique, and the film makers needed only to transfer the story to their far more effective medium in order to produce a successful historical epic. This in part they planned to do, and partially they carried it through. They too can lift you into the scene; and they can let the scene tell its own story, so that no narrator's voice intrudes to put you back in your seat.

There are moments in *Is Paris Burning?* when you feel you are in the presence of history: when leaders of the Resistance meet to vote on strategy, when Resistance fighters battle German Panzers alongside the Seine, when the bells of Notre Dame shake off their cobwebs and ring out for the first time in four years. The viewer is in the past, with all its uncertainty and suspense, just as the reader experiences the Battle of Waterloo in *The Charterhouse of Parma;* only the film can move the viewer anywhere, can rapidly create a sense of the whole, without sacrificing suspense.

But this film does sacrifice nearly