



Transports of Delight

BY AND LARGE, movie critics are a fairly sedentary lot. They sit either with eyes glued to the screen or with nose buried in the type-writer. A few weeks ago, however, they were darting about the country like bugs on water, first descending on New York for a trio of previews sponsored by Twentieth Century-Fox, then skittering on to Los Angeles to look at Warner Brothers' *The Great Race*. Whereupon some of the hardier souls turned right around and returned to New York for the premiere of United Artists' *The Hallelujah Trail*. As if to accentuate this unwonted mobility, all of the films screened centered about some mode of transportation—planes, boats, trains, autos, Conestoga wagons. For chairborne critics, between what was happening on the screen and what was happening in fact, it was a whole new world, and a fairly pleasant one. They not only covered a good deal of ground; they also covered a good many good films.

Best of the lot, by my reckoning, was *The Great Race*, an opulent and affectionate spoofing both of turn-of-the-century cars and turn-of-the-century dramatics. Despite overtones of *Around the World in 80 Days* and *Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines*, this Blake Edwards concoction was always original, always inventive, and outrageously funny. (The "outrage" stems from Edwards's uncanny ability to take something as hackneyed and banal as a pie-throwing sequence and choreograph it into a precise and perfect apotheosis of every slapstick comedy you have ever seen—with the added intricacy of Technicolor thrown in for good measure.) But that's what makes *The Great Race* such superb entertainment. The ingredients may be utterly familiar, from strong-minded suffragettes to slam-bang barroom brannigans; yet when Edwards fondles them with his wildly off-center wit they seem fresh and effective all over again. The pie-throwing, for example, gains enormously from the sight of Tony Curtis, immaculate in white, strolling among the flying pastries, apparently impervious to the multi-hued mayhem that surrounds him. The second half of the film is practically given over to a nutty rewrite of *The Prisoner of Zenda*, with Jack Lemmon marvelously villainous and versatile as the American Professor Fate, and marvelously inane as the effete Prince the professor is forced to impersonate.

Better still are the throw-away gags—the opening title slides that set both the mood and the period for what is to follow; the occasional sparkle that gleams from Tony Curtis's teeth and eyes; Natalie Wood's vast and magnificent wardrobe, which seems to change almost from shot to shot, although her only luggage from New York to Paris is a small traveling bag; or a moose head mounted on a wall (as the camera trundles past, we see the remainder of the moose *behind* the wall). Perhaps best of all is Edwards's device for dodging the inevitable letdown of the obligatory romantic interlude. As Miss Wood sings the sentimental lyric to *The Sweetheart Tree*, the audience is invited to follow the bouncing ball and sing along. Since the tune was composed for the film by Henry Mancini, the chances are that it will soon become as familiar as his *Moon River*, and the invitation will be eagerly accepted.

Blake Edwards has dedicated his picture "To Mr. Laurel and Mr. Hardy"; and while those estimable gentlemen, if they were still with us, might possibly have reminded Mr. Edwards that they were at their best when they were at their briefest, they could only have smiled approvingly at his passion for improvised foolishness and his gift for creating chaos out of confusion. His other virtues—an uncloying nostalgia, an eye that appreciates not only the absurdities but the beauties of a bygone age, and a firm hand on the story lines—are perhaps less immediately apparent, particularly in a film so dominated by its trio of stars. Without them, however, the adjective in the title would certainly have needed some modification.

Von Ryan's Express, based on David Westheimer's recent best-seller, is also composed of rather familiar components. Indeed, yet another break-out from a wartime prison camp would seem to be just about the last thing any of us needed right now. But once again superior writing by Wendell Mayes and Joseph Landon, superior direction by Mark Robson, and a superior cast headed by Frank Sinatra, Trevor Howard, Sergio Fantoni, and Edward Mulhare contrive to transform familiar merchandise into absorbing, tingling entertainment. Perhaps precisely because the ingredients are so familiar, little time is wasted in sketching in either the characters or the situation. Within the first half-hour, the bedraggled Allied POWs are herded aboard a train ready to haul

them from Italy to Germany; ten minutes later, Sinatra and his cohorts overpower their captors and take over the train—and from then on it's a wild dash for the Swiss border, with ingenious ruses to hold at bay the hordes of pursuing Nazis. The prevailing tone is high adventure, however, with the accent falling on boldness rather than on bloodshed; and everything clicks along with the gathering momentum of the train itself.

—ARTHUR KNIGHT.

The Wilder Shores of Humor

A BRITISH-MADE film, *The Knack*, grand prize winner at the recent Cannes Film Festival, is a curious mixture of subtle humor and the wildest kind of exaggeration. Ann Jellicoe's play, on which it is based, was a modest but indubitable success, especially as directed by Mike Nichols for its New York run; and it would seem that Richard Lester, already famed for *A Hard Day's Night*, was utterly determined to top Nichols in inventiveness. He has used the thin story material of the play as a springboard for a series of improvisations set in today's London and involving some self-consciously loony young people who appear to be rebelling in an inchoate manner against various kinds of conformity. So determinedly is the story line kicked around that it is not always easy to discover. Basically, however, it has to do with a young provincial girl's arrival in London and her adventures with three young men who inhabit a house of garishly bohemian character.

One of the men, Tolen, has a knack for seduction and a long line of waiting and ready girls to prove his prowess. He pilots a motorcycle, wears dark glasses and black leather gloves, and claims to have sexual needs far beyond the average. Colin, the young landlord, a teacher of mathematics, claims to have a need for girls, too, and plaintively wonders why he can't have even one. The third member of the household is a neuter of some sort, who expresses his neutrality by painting his share of the living quarters white, including the windows. Into this ménage enters the girl, Nancy, obviously an object for seduction, and on whom Tolen is willing to prove his knack, much to the anguish of Colin, who would like to have the girl for himself. Colin gets her eventually, but only after the girl has gone around crying "rape!"—a fantasy engendered in her mind by the purposeful Tolen.

The delights in the film—and there are many—have little to do with the above outline. One zany sequence shows the girl and two of the men rolling an ancient iron bedstead through the streets of London; it has been purchased in an antique dealer's yard and must now be wheeled home, and the visual variations

achieved with this prop amount to inspired directorial virtuosity. Mr. Lester is aided by some fine players, including Rita Tushingham as the girl, Ray Brooks as the young man with a knack, Michael Crawford as the ardent landlord, and Donal Donnelly as the room painter. Does it mean much of anything? In a way, it does, for what finally emerges is less a story of young love and sex than of young people finding ways of asserting individuality in a bleak, crowded city-world, full of people all too willing to behave as people have always behaved. "Mods and rockers," a woman onlooker comments disdainfully. But they aren't that at all; they are merely attempting wittily, madly, desperately to find a way out of the mass absurdity.

Another new comedy, *What's New Pussycat?*, also seeks humor and amusement through wildness, but it somehow manages to misfire all along the line. Heaven knows the director, Clive Donner, had plentiful resources—a cast that includes Peter O'Toole, Peter Sellers, Romy Schneider, Paula Prentiss, and Woody Allen; several million dollars worth of production funds; and that most valuable asset of all, a free hand—but he presumably lacked a script. In the case of *The Knack*, a script obviously existed and Mr. Lester proceeded to kick it around. For *What's New Pussycat?* we are told the film stems from a screenplay by Woody Allen, but it appears to have disappeared entirely in the finished product, and poetic and dramatic license is required of reviewer and viewer to achieve a semblance of sense in describing it.

As far as can be determined, a male editor of a Paris fashion magazine (Peter O'Toole) is in need of psychoanalytic treatment because he likes girls so much and doesn't feel ready to marry the beautiful Romy Schneider. The analyst he sees turns out to be Peter Sellers, who wears a long Beatle-type wig and is married to a blond, fat Wagnerian-soprano-type wife. Invited to a group analytic session, O'Toole encounters a nymphomaniac woman in the person of Capucine. Attending a performance of striptease at the Crazy Horse Saloon with the lascivious Sellers, O'Toole takes up with a leggy, suicidal stripper (played by Paula Prentiss). All these people, as directed by Mr. Donner, then proceed to go rather unpleasantly mad.

Everyone involved presumably felt they were having a lot of stylish fun with this non-plot, and maybe that's the trouble. So admiring are they of their freedom that they all come out stilted and artificial, and almost entirely unfunny. The madder the pace set by the director, the more the would-be comedy creaks, and eventually it collapses into a yawning pit of boredom.

—HOLLIS ALPERT.



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