



The Problem

THE RACIAL STORY, or the story with racial overtones, has in recent years become the province of independent film-makers, who have found the field left open to them by the ever cautious major producers. Such films as *The Cool World*, *Nothing But a Man*, and *One Potato, Two Potato* were financed outside of the usual studio channels, and only the more recent *A Man Called Adam*, in which Sammy Davis, Jr., portrays a tragic jazz trumpeter (while Mel Tormé does the singing) received backing along more orthodox lines from Joseph E. Levine's Embassy Pictures. Except for *One Potato, Two Potato*, the earnings of these films have been lean indeed, and so, when a new one is embarked upon, courage, faith, and a certain dedication are required.

The latest, *Sweet Love, Bitter*, was made for about \$400,000 by Gerard Kleppel and Robert Ferman, and has for its stars Dick Gregory, Don Murray, and Diane Varsi, an assemblage that could conceivably spark some audience interest, aside from its values as a film.

Sweet Love, Bitter was adapted by Herbert Danska and Lewis Jacobs from *Night Song*, a novel by John Williams which was said to have been inspired, at least in part, by the sad fate of Charlie "Bird" Parker, jazz musician extraordinary. In the film this musician is called Richie "Eagle" Stokes, and he is played with surprising conviction and considerable realism by Dick Gregory, who now adds movie stardom to his other attainments. But there is less conviction in the handling of the material by Herbert Danska, who appears to be searching for and exploring a suitable cinematic style, without ever finding it. He mingles gray, grimy realism with all too studied moments of dream and fantasy; he combines two cities—Philadelphia and New York—into one The City; and he obtains performances that are uneven, to say the least.

Don Murray, as a college instructor of English heading rapidly toward Skid Row, is vague as a character and only mechanically sincere as an actor. Diane Varsi, who here returns to movies after

a nine-year retirement, is seen as the mistress of an intellectual Negro who runs a hip hangout for jazz musicians, and while she is pleasant to look at, she is all too intense and lugubrious in her role. In fact, the whole movie is pervaded by The Problem, not just the "Eagle's" problem of heroin addiction, not just Miss Varsi's problem of attaining satisfactory sex and social relationships with her Negro boy friend, and not the college instructor's problem of rescuing himself from the guilt he feels over the death of his wife in an automobile accident. The Problem seems to be that some people are white and others black—and there's no way out of it.

Filmically, that is. For in life there are whites and blacks who on occasion do manage to take advantage of our relatively open society, who develop their talents, and who gain successes and human satisfactions. Particularly, the talented. And, when one tragic case is made symbolic or symptomatic of the whole, as occurs in this film—and also in *A Man Called Adam*—the material tends to take on tones that are strident and sentimental. "Eagle," we are told and shown, never managed to face reality, and that is why he dies from an overdose of heroin. But just what is that "reality"? As far as can be ascertained from the film, it is The Problem.

In real life, Dick Gregory is an active, effective leader in the movement for social equality; he is a witty and engaging entertainer; and he is also, as this film proves, a remarkably talented actor. In real life, Sammy Davis, Jr., is a fabulously successful singer and actor, and a personality of enormous fame. And yet each chose roles requiring the portrayal of inchoate anger, frustration, and failure. There is something odd here.

What seems to be true is that film dramaturgy that deals with racial themes is tending more and more to concentrate on somewhat clichéd assumptions rather than on truer distillations of reality. The negative side exists, quite obviously, but even that negative side is seldom explored honestly. And while I am not recommending Dale Carnegie-type positive thinking, there is a case to be made for changes in orientation and attitude among Negroes and whites alike. When I turn on my TV set for the 6 o'clock news I meet, through this medium each day, intelligent, articulate, and impressive Americans who are Negro, and I meet whites who seem fully aware of the realities of the changing situation. But I do not meet these people in movies. Instead of problems, I meet The Problem, and it's always the same, and it's always all but hopeless. I doubt that it is, and it is my television set and not such undeniably earnest films as *Sweet Love, Bitter* that is the cause of my doubt.

—HOLLIS ALPERT.

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Pinter's Hilarious Depth Charge

B RITISH PLAYWRIGHT Harold Pinter's newest work, *The Homecoming*, is pure theater, a play with all the emotional and didactic fat neatly trimmed off. To appreciate it we must pass through the looking glass into Pinter's deliberately distorted world which, like Kafka's or Beckett's, is not the civil one in which we pretend to live nor the barbaric one of animals, but the subconscious one in which the two worlds wage an eternal battle for coexistence. In *The Homecoming* we see the whole futile and ironic fight more fully joined than we ever let it be.

The curtain rises on John Bury's inspired setting, an enormous living room in which a few pieces of rundown furniture slightly larger than life-size are tilted at us to intensify the play's strange atmosphere, and free us from normal expectancies. It is a jungle cave in which an all-male family of four fight to preserve their virility.

At its head is Max, the patriarchal widower, fiercely played by Paul Rogers. Max knows his physical strength is decreasing and this makes him all the more vicious in his self-assertion. Max's brother, Sam, portrayed with appropriate anemia by John Normington, has long since been defeated not only by the crushingly powerful Max, but by his never consummated love for the woman Max married. He clings to a hollow pride in being the best, i.e., the most subservient, chauffeur in a car rental firm.

Two of Max's three grown sons complete the deteriorating household. Joey, a fat, submissive brute, played with amusing denseness by Terence Rigby, is being pushed by the family to become a prizefighter, and all that's keeping him from success is that he doesn't know how to defend himself and he doesn't know how to attack. The other brother, Lenny, is the complete pragmatist who usually reaches his goal with the least expenditure of words and energy, and who reacts viciously to the least suspicion that he is being used by someone else. Lenny is performed by Ian Holm, a young actor supreme at sarcasm who, like Olivier, emanates a feeling of just barely controlled danger.

Into this cage of predatory human animals unexpectedly arrive the third brother, Teddy, and his wife, Ruth, who are passing through London on the way home to America after a European holiday. Teddy has escaped from the family by adopting intellectualism and becoming

a professor of philosophy. His problem is that in order to retain his objectivity he must exercise such mastery of his emotions that he has almost reached the point of no longer having them. As Teddy, Michael Craig shows us more of the struggle not to express his feelings than he does the recognition of his tragic nonemotionalism. His wife, on the other hand, is the essence of femaleness. In an exquisitely direct performance, Vivien Merchant commences as a woman seeking to be dominated more strongly than her husband now is willing to do. Lenny senses this immediately and attempts to make her more submissive preparatory to seducing her. But Ruth's instincts are aroused and we see that she will use the seduction to dominate him. Only Lenny's shrewdness forestalls this.

However, the forces have been set in motion and Ruth proceeds to use her seductiveness to conquer and emasculate the others in the family. She is not being evil, but merely following her own instincts for self-preservation. When the time comes for her to decide whether she will return to her home and children in America or become a high-class prostitute in order to stay on and continue her domination of this newfound male stronghold, Teddy proves unwilling to do more than present a balanced statement of the advantages and disadvantages of each course of action; his self-preservation depends upon his maintenance of complete objectivity. It is Miss Merchant's achievement, however, that not just at this point but throughout

the play we sense her tragic awareness that she is both the conqueror and the victim of her husband's family.

Peter Hall has directed his Royal Shakespeare Company cast with his special sensitivity to Pinter. Most telling is the use of precisely timed silences in which the dropped pebble of a line seems to send out infinitely widening circles of unstated implications. Furthermore, Mr. Hall has nicely achieved the truth and humor that come from characters saying the opposite of what they are doing, or justifying unsentimental acts with torrents of sentimental clichés.

The Homecoming will undoubtedly baffle and shock, because Pinter is a kind of theatrical acupuncturist tapping the deepest nerves intuitively rather than scientifically. Thus, while no family will find itself mirrored in this one, every family may feel that Pinter has come uncomfortably close to hitting forces it only in some degree manages to master.

—HENRY HEWES.

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