

SR Goes to the Movies

Roland Gelatt

Arlo as Arlo

LOOKING ACROSS the generation gap to the under-twenty-fives who wear long hair, groove to rock, and burn draft cards, film director Arthur Penn observes: "We are witnessing something in which rebellion is not the essential characteristic. These kids are onto something much more genuine, much more tender. . . . I'm hoping that the film will be able to elucidate that part of their subculture in a way that I haven't seen done elsewhere yet." The quotation comes from Joseph Gelmis's forthcoming book *The Film Director as Superstar* (Doubleday), and the movie in question is *Alice's Restaurant*, a semi-documentary account of hippie manners and mores that is certain to become one of the season's most talked-about productions.

The film is not calculated to win easy converts. Its structure, its stylistic focus, its point of view are elusive. One tries in vain to target its central theme. Is it about Alice and Ray, the nonconformist couple who inhabit a deconsecrated church and run a restaurant in Stockbridge, Massachusetts? Is it about Arlo Guthrie, the laconic and puckishly charming young folk singer who swims in and out of their orbit? Or is it about the entire cluster of draft-age kids who use Alice and Ray's offbeat home as a kind of anti-establishment refuge? The answer has to be that the picture is really about them all. It flits with seeming capriciousness from scene to scene and character to character, starting one story line, then dropping it for another, picking out slices of life—a bit of this, a bit of that—much like a bakery clerk assembling a pound of assorted cookies. This method entails some initial confusion and ultimately leaves a good deal unexplained, but it also serves to yield a richness of vision that might have been lost in a conventional ordering of sequences.

Another source of both weakness and strength can be found in the film's sometimes precarious balancing of reality and make-believe. Most of the people portrayed in *Alice's Restaurant* are alive and well and living in various parts of the country, and a few of them play themselves—most notably Arlo Guthrie, but also such subsidiary characters as his companion, Geoff Outlaw, and his Stockbridge nemesis, Officer William Obenheim. This makes for a curious sense of disorientation,

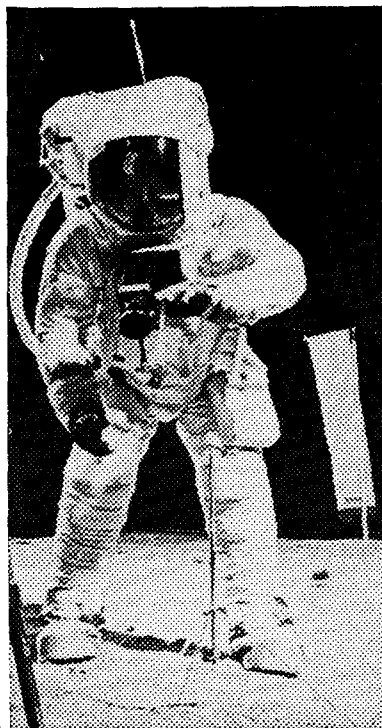
of never being quite sure when fact ends and fiction begins. It certainly casts an ambivalent light on the hospital room scene in which Pete Seeger and Arlo try to entertain the dying Woody Guthrie (played by Joseph Boley). The scene has undeniable pathos, but part of its effect derives from our awareness that two of its three principals are re-creating a moment of life they actually experienced in the not too distant past.

The film is imperfect, but it is also extraordinarily communicative, absorbing, and entertaining. Especially entertaining. Two of the episodes are taken directly from Arlo's well-known song, "Alice's Restaurant Massacre," and both are hilarious bits of deadpan black comedy. Fortunately, Arthur Penn has not taken his mandate to elucidate the hippie subculture as an excuse for scowling solemnity. While giving full due to the basic sobriety and sensitivity of these young people, he also shows them gathering a high quotient of enjoyment from their un-

conventional and seemingly disordered life. The film is especially good at defining the casual, no-hangups attitude toward sex that is currently fashionable. The girls here get down to business without so much as a tentative paw from the young man who catches their fancy. "Are you going to make your move or not?" one of them asks Arlo with tart impatience.

Altogether, the film makes a far more appealing case for the hippies than does *Easy Riders*. This is partly because of Arlo Guthrie, whose good humor, decency, and genuineness are so engaging. But I think it is mainly because the director does not try to argue their case too vehemently. Despite his evident admiration, Penn is looking at these young dissidents from a certain distance. We are not meant to approve of everything we see. In fact, the final shot—a long, slow pan of Alice staring forlornly and despairingly into space after an excessively turned-on party—might be taken to indicate that hippiedom is a failure, that the community she mothered so tenderly had reached a vacant dead end. Or it might not. The beauty of this film is that it invites speculation and reappraisal. With all its flaws and ambivalences, it compels consideration as a legitimate work of art.

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World of Dance

Walter Terry

Ageless Pierrot

LEE, MASS.

MIDWAY in this summer's ten-week Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival—the thirty-seventh year of the festival itself and the twenty-eighth year in the Ted Shawn Theatre—John Christian, the Pillow's executive director, brought together on one program an avant-garde, multi-media company in its festival debut, and the first dancer, other than Shawn himself, to bring dance to what was once an old Berkshire farm. The new company was the Gruppe Motion Berlin; the veteran soloist was Barton Mumaw, who made his professional debut in a Shawn production at Lewisohn Stadium in 1931 and who, two years later, became featured soloist with Ted Shawn and His Men Dancers (1933-1940).

Mumaw's selections included *Two Negro Spirituals* ("Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" and "Get on Board Little Children"), *Johnny Comes Marching Home*—both choreographed by the dancer himself—and his most famous solo, "Pierrot in the Dead City" (from Erich Korngold's *Die Tote Stadt*), created for him by Shawn in 1935. This "Pierrot," ineffably sad, was seen by countless thousands of concertgoers in almost every city and town in America and in other lands as well. If those same audiences could



Barton Mumaw, at fifty-eight, in "Pierrot in the Dead City"—"made the yesterdays seem like todays."

have seen Mumaw again this month, thirty years later, I doubt that they could have detected any difference in the appearance of the dancer or in his lightness of movement and technical control.

Even in those moments when the forlorn Pierrot seeks to recapture the gaiety he once knew in the now empty city, Mumaw gave forth with those sweeping *renversés* and those fleet

brisés volés—movement echoes of a joyous past. It was lovely to see "Pierrot in the Dead City" once again. It was also, of course, nostalgic, a nostalgia unsullied by rueful memories of better days, for Mumaw himself turned back the clock and made the yesterdays seem like todays.

The Pillow's newest festival acquisition, Gruppe Motion Berlin, is not likely to have many successful tomorrows if its *Countdown for Orpheus* is a fair example (I would imagine that the best was chosen for a Jacob's Pillow debut) of the repertory. Founded in 1962 by Brigitta Herrmann, Manfred Fischbeck, and Hellmut Fricke-Gottschild in Germany, and now with headquarters in Philadelphia, the "Gruppe" brought to the Pillow a long, long experiment that included projected close-ups of eyes (for example), electronic sounds, live grunts and other vocal emissions, and some well-shaped bodies doing some random movements of less than random interest.

Among the projections was a countdown in numerals. This appeared on the side wall of the theater, not the stage, and when some members of the audiences caught on that it indicated how many minutes left to go, they decided to go. As long as one felt, "Well, it'll be over any minute now," the courteous thing was to stay; but once warned, escape was paramount. As meandering lights touched stage and theater walls, I was amused to note that two great dance portraits, one on either side of the theater, of Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn—pioneers, rebels, and avant-gardists—of an earlier epoch, remained serene. Shawn, in his Indian "Feather of the Dawn" dance, looked upward for solace from the Great Spirit, while St. Denis, as the Japanese Goddess of Mercy, looked downward in what might possibly have been forgiveness.

Some of the dancers in Gruppe Motion Berlin moved well and with a certain motor urgency, but it wasn't enough. You will find much, much better multi-media dance explorations elsewhere.

This particular program also had a dash of Spanish dance, provided for by Teresa and her ensemble. Of particular interest was Teresa's exploration of the underlying rhythms of music by Johann Sebastian Bach in an excerpt from a toccata and in four two-part inventions. You may think of Bach in terms of a well-tempered clavier, but Teresa made you hear him by way of *taconeo*, the heel-beats of Spain. What she came up with were studies rather than dances, but they were fascinating, far more fascinating—ancient Spain and old Bach—than the presumably novel Gruppe Motion Berlin.

Views of Our Sphere

By Ernest Sandeen

We deserved that earth-shot from the moon's asbestos-gray horizon: a family portrait on the old homestead, yet not a single one of us could be seen and the only history being made was storm-swirls over rocks and oceans.

So our prophets from as long ago as the close of paradise had at last a picture to illustrate their remarks.

As the atoms in our invisible heads go on blasting out toward darker and darker lights what can we hope for but smaller and smaller snapshots of this place already small and lonesome enough.

The countdown, however, is pulsing in all our engineered spaces of mind, and each flight now must explode into the next till we and our shape in the sun and our weather vanish altogether (all together).