

MOVIES

Altman, le Misanthrope

Arthur Schlesinger, jr.

WHEN I discussed the American Film Institute poll on the greatest American movies in this space some months ago (January 21), I complained about several notable movies that had been unaccountably left out of the top 10. In filing my complaint, I unaccountably left one out myself—Robert Altman's *Nashville*, the most original and brilliant American film of the Seventies.

I thought about *Nashville* as I saw Altman's *A Wedding* (20th Century-Fox). If Altman meant *Nashville* as, among other things, an inquiry into the nature of our mass culture, then *A Wedding* might be taken as a companion inquiry into the nature of the American family. If this is so, while his kaleidoscopic narrative technique remains as fascinating as ever, his vision of America has narrowed and cheapened.

A Wedding opens, suitably enough, with a wedding. The scene shifts rapidly to a fine old Chicago mansion where the head of the groom's family, a very old and very patrician lady, lies dying in her room. As patterns begin to form in the kaleidoscope, we begin to gather that she has three daughters. One, who married an Italian waiter years before, is the mother of the groom. A second is a hyperefficient businesswoman married to a dopy fat man. The third is carrying on with the

able black manservant of the house.

The bride's family is lower-class Louisville. But this hardly matters since the Chicago family has evidently been ostracized as a result of the Italian misalliance; only one guest beyond the wedding party comes to the reception.

In the familiar Altman style, the camera darts from kitchen to drawing room to bathroom to bedroom while the characters talk desperately at and over one another. An atmosphere of incipient hysteria pervades the film. *Nashville* had a climate of hysteria too, but the characters retained dignity even in their moments of exposure, humiliation, and ruin. By comparison, *A Wedding* is a heartless movie. Everything is played for laughs. Everyone—except the old lady, who dies in the first half-hour—is systematically stripped of dignity. The bride wears braces on her teeth. Her sister is a nymphomaniac. Her brother is an epileptic. The groom is a satyr. His mother is a drug addict. His uncle is a philanderer. The charming old bishop who performs the ceremony is on the edge of senility. The family doctor strokes every female breast in sight. Before the film ends we wander on into homosexuality (male and female), heroin, violence.

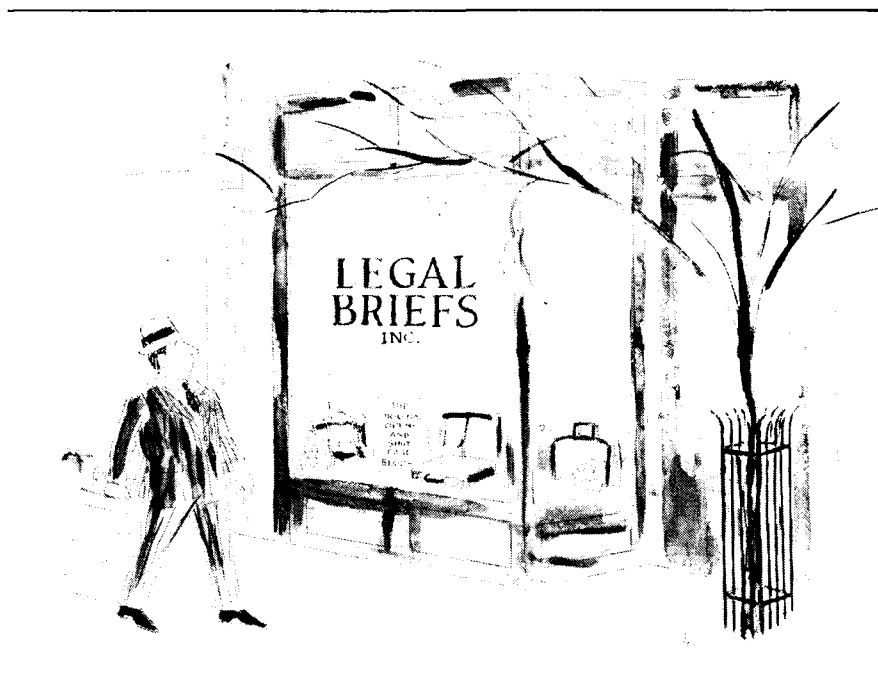
Despite these excesses, *A Wedding* is worth seeing. Altman cannot make a boring film. He has an exact ear for

sappy American conversation. The kaleidoscopic cutting infuses the movie with some of the incompleteness, irrelevance, and confusion of living. If Altman cuts his characters down, at the same time he encourages his actors to play these characters with strength and definition—thus Lillian Gish's acerbic authority as head of the family, Howard Duff's weary resignation as doctor to a family of zanies, Dina Merrill's courteous incredulity as the hyper-efficient sister, John Cromwell's befuddled charm as the aging bishop, Vittorio Gassman's sardonic patience as the Italian husband, Geraldine Chaplin's smarmy professionalism as the director of the wedding staff.

Still, the irony is too glib, too methodically calculated, to be persuasive. Nor can this film be taken simply as an indictment of the hypocrisies of American life. Altman makes his Italian characters quite as ridiculous as he makes his fellow countrymen. One is left with the sense of having witnessed an explosion of misanthropy.

Who Is Killing the Great Chefs of Europe? (Warner Brothers) has a witty script by Peter Stone, a gourmet's relish in *haute cuisine*, a splendid, showy performance by Robert Morley, and an entertaining mystery plot. The film moves blithely on from London to Venice to Paris as, one after another, the great chefs are eliminated by some unknown miscreant. The French sequences are especially diverting, with the local chefs confronted by a fateful dilemma: whether it is better to be murdered or to survive with the stigma of not having been chosen by the discriminating assassin as the top chef of France.

Ted Kotcheff, the director, has a poetic eye for food. Never have the rituals of cooking been more lovingly depicted in a movie. If only his touch were as deft with human beings! Alas, his direction is a little too broad for so subtle a screenplay. He seems to have instructed his cast to act at the top of their voices. Even reliable performers like George Segal and Jean-Pierre Cassel appear frantic when they should be easy, controlled, relaxed. One has the feeling that a marvelous soufflé has been somewhat spoiled by a mediocre cook. Still, *Who Is Killing the Great Chefs* remains highly edible. But then one thinks what a great chef like Lubitsch might have done with it. ●



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THEATER

Openings in the Non-News Vacuum

by Martin Gottfried

ARISTOTLE WONDERED whether a falling tree makes a sound if nobody is there to see it. He had no television set. Our senses have been extended. We need not see with our own two eyes to believe. The television camera sees for us, as do newspapers, archaic as they are beginning to seem.

We are never more aware of our dependence on these extended senses than when they are absent. The current New York theater season began in the vacuum of a newspaper strike. Producers whose plays were already running could only hope the public remembered what was playing and where. New productions were faced with establishing their existence, let alone their quality. There were no eyes for the public; the interim newspapers that appeared during the strike carried as little authority as their comic-strip names. A newspaper that doesn't itself seem real can hardly communicate a credible reality.

Productions did open. They opened because actors can't be kept on salary while producers wait for a strike to end. The season even had the annual out-of-town casualties that are part of the ritual: A lavish revival of Gershwin's *Oh, Kay!* folded in Washington; *Back Country*, a big new musical, called it a season in Boston; *Broadway, Broadway*, a comedy, never made it there.

The play that began this Broadway season would have been a non-occurrence even without a newspaper strike. *Players* was an Australian drama about a power struggle among a football team's executives. It did not explain, for the sake of American audiences, exactly what Australian football is, but for that matter, neither did it explain why it was written at all. This was one of those plays that proceed, in a perfectly professional way, to nowhere. And so the eccentric *Players* disappeared into the limbo of unreality created by the strike. You had to go downtown yourself to find out whether it was still being performed, and who remembered how to learn things firsthand?

If theater isn't a firsthand experience, it is nothing. Presence is its essential and unique quality. The more palpable of Broadway's early premieres was *Eubie!*—a sort of *Ain't Misbehavin' Part Two*. The holdover success from last season is an elaborately staged con-

cert—a sketchless and wordless musical revue based on the songs of Fats Waller. *Eubie!* does much the same with the music of Eubie Blake.

James Hubert Blake and Thomas Waller were products and victims of an America whose racial attitudes we can look back on with something less than pride. Their nicknames, "Eubie" and "Fats," reflect the condescension with which they were treated and with which they had to deal.

There is an interesting contrast between these two black composers who survived a time (the Twenties and Thirties) of complacent bigotry. Blake succeeded by writing songs in the white style ("I'm Just Wild About Harry," "Memories of You"). Waller managed by pretending to be the playful black man whose raunchiness could fulfill white fantasies. Because he was strictly a songwriter, Blake had to depend on others to make his songs popular. Perhaps that is why he wrote revues called *Shuffle Along* and *Chocolate Dandies*, though I suspect he merely accepted the way things were. Waller, though sometimes forced to sell songs to white composers ("On the Sunny Side of the Street," "I Can't Give You Anything but Love, Baby"), could—being a performer—express his resentments, injecting irony into seemingly servile numbers. The snorting contempt beneath Waller's laughter seems more manly and less acquiescent than Blake's formula white songs. There was rebellion and dignity in Waller's work.

Yet if Blake's songs seem an attempt to sound white, Waller's could be shameful in a much more profound way. After all, his "Black and Blue" includes the lyric:

I'm white, inside,
But that don't help my case
'Cause I can't hide
What is on my face . . .

Though Waller didn't write that lyric (Andy Razaf did), we must suppose he accepted its philosophy of blackness being a cross to bear.

I suspect that black people would not judge Waller or Blake as harshly as white liberals would. Uncle Tomming, during *times when*, is for the most part treated compassionately. There is almost a joy and pride in such survival. Blacks don't make the mistake other minority groups often make, blaming

their own for enduring persecution.

The singing of "Black and Blue" is the most powerful moment in *Ain't Misbehavin'*, because of its grievous lyrics and because of the young black actors singing them with such steely-eyed comprehension. This drama, plus the plain superiority of Waller's songs over Blake's, plus a greater integrity of production style, make *Ain't Misbehavin'* better theater than *Eubie!* Yet as a commercial entertainment and as a tribute to a songwriter still alive at 95, the latter can do no harm.

Neither can *On Golden Pond*. This first play by Ernest Thompson began the season at the Hudson Guild, a modest off-Broadway institution that has established a reputation for reliability. *On Golden Pond* risks being corny. Its story is simple: An 80-year-old man, depressed by his approaching death, has his vitality (and perhaps his life) saved by the 13-year-old grandson who brings him the gift of youth. At the same time, the man and his wife come to savor the profound love they share. Well-written for character and dialogue, and beautifully performed by actors who can take advantage of that, this lovely play creates a gentle, emotional satisfaction that good theater can provide even when it isn't great.

It is interesting, I think, to compare such success with the considerably more ambitious aspirations of the Circle in the Square's *The Inspector General*. The director of this production, a Rumanian named Liviu Ciulei, has been heralded as a genius on the basis of works he directed for Washington's Arena Stage. Nikolai Gogol's satire of politicians and people has become a staple because, though only a minor classic, it cannot be done badly or fail to entertain. But, as with most publicized genius, Ciulei's was prematurely hailed, and as with most foolproof plays, *The Inspector General* had not yet proved itself with every fool.

Refusing to trust the play, Ciulei overdirected. Dipping into basic East European avant-gardism, which is still essentially Brechtian, as if he'd just discovered it, Ciulei indulged himself, stifling the play in the process.

So, for better or worse, the season did begin. Perhaps we have learned that the theater is a firsthand experience and exists whether or not there are newspapers. ●