

Beatty's Ambitious Try

1981 may not have been the best or worst of movie years, but it had its offerings of excellence. Even with some of last month's latecomers unpreviewed at this writing, we could compile that traditional ten best list: *Chariots of Fire*, *Ragtime*, *Prince of the City*, *S.O.B.*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Whose Life Is It Anyway?*, *Atlantic City*, *True Confessions*, *On Golden Pond*, *Blood Wedding*, and if you need replacements for any of the above, consider *Stevie*, *Quartet*, *Superman II*, *The Last Metro*, *Gallipoli*, *City of Women*, *Arthur*, *Body Heat*...

Warren Beatty's *Reds* merits listing if

power in 1917 and who, dying in Russia in 1920 at 33, is the only American buried in the Kremlin. Reed's career in the film includes a condensed history of American radicalism in the 1915-20 period (the International Workers of the World led by Big Bill Haywood, the Socialist Party, and the emergence of the Communist Party from a left-wing Socialist splinter group); it includes the avant-garde-intellectual circles of the period, from Greenwich Village to Provincetown and back. Its "personal" story is of Reed's relationship with Louise Bryant, an aspiring writer-feminist, a stormy and, as

"witnesses" are not identified, and only a few will recognize, as I was able to, even Roger Baldwin, Henry Miller (his four-letter-word is a help), Adela Rogers St. John, Hamilton Fish, George Jessel, Rebecca West, and Arthur Mayer.

To fulfill these ambitions, Beatty and his editors (the gifted Dede Allen has served as co-executive producer as well as co-editor) have culled out of oceans of film (shot in England, Finland, and Spain, as well as the U.S.) three hours and 15 minutes (plus a 15-minute intermission) of frequently dazzling action-filled film. But there is scarcely a pause for introspection or intensity. The overall rhythm becomes a seesawing between a "tumultuous" romance and an equally "tumultuous" social history, and both frequently verge on the tedious. The spectacular—whether it is a party convention, hordes in Petrograd, a clash between Red and White Russian armies, a ski trek across frozen Finnish wastelands—minimizes personal relationships; the intimate drama in turn tends to trivialize the larger social upheavals. By intermission, after nearly two hours, the message seems to be that love is a many-splendored revolution.

Only two stars as charismatic as Beatty and Keaton could succeed, as they indeed do, in holding the



Beatty as John Reed, running to board a Russian gun wagon (left) and with Keaton, in *Reds*.

only for its ambitious concept, its moments of brilliance, its texture, and its sincerity. Much like David Lean's screen version of *Doctor Zhivago*, it attempts to combine character study, romance, and the Russian Revolution—and falls victim to its variety of focus.

Beatty not only stars, he produced, directed, and collaborated on the screenplay with Trevor Griffiths, and he has gone far beyond the *Zhivago* concept. *Reds* is Beatty's biography of John Reed, the American journalist and radical leader whose *Ten Days That Shook the World* remains the best eyewitness account of the Bolsheviks' seizure of

depicted, torrid romance that proved the triumph of love and marriage over recurrent claims to (and attempts at) independence of careers and sexual freedom.

Further—and most fascinatingly—Beatty has reached for an historical perspective, with 32 contemporaries of Reed and Bryant commenting on them and/or on their time as "witnesses." With close-ups of their wonderfully aged faces (in their late seventies to nineties, a number have died since filming began several years ago), they provide a magnificent temporal contrast to the youthful beauty of both Beatty and Diane Keaton as the couple in their prime. Unfortunately, the

attention, but even they, revealing themselves early on (as well-conceived and well-portrayed characters should), become repetitious. In contrast, the relatively brief portraits—Jack Nicholson's of Eugene O'Neill, who gets all the good lines; Maureen Stapleton's of Emma Goldman, who makes us long for more about this compassionate idealist—create the deepest impression. For all of Reed's comings and goings, for all of Bryant's teary-eyed avowals of independence, it is the vignettes of time, place, and public personalities that overshadow them.

Granted Beatty's grandiose scheme,

the pedantry of its exposition is almost—but not quite—excusable. There is over-detailing of party politics, of sexual couplings—and ellipses where explanation is called for, particularly in recording the American political climate and labor scene. But what does work—a sense of relationship, a sense of history, spectacle that is to the point—is extraordinary, and the ambition is admirable.

More conventional romance is on hand in Arthur Penn's **Four Friends**, written by Steven Tesich. With *Eyewitness* behind him and his adaptation of *The World According to Garp* ahead of us, Tesich has returned to the autobiographical material he touched upon in his first screenplay and major success, the perceptive and joyous *Breaking Away*. But Tesich—and Penn—are in a more serious and ambitious mood in this story of an immigrant lad and three friends whom we get to know as members of the high school class of 1961 who are coming of age in the midwestern steel town of East Chicago, Illinois. In this peculiarly contrived and too frequently incredible tale, it becomes all too clear too soon that we are being told a morality tale about the American Dream.

The protagonist, Danilo, brought from Yugoslavia by his mother to join the father he has never seen, arrives with and retains a glowing concept of that dream, only to be alienated over the years from his father, who has found America only in terms of steel-mill grime and sweat. The focal point of Danilo's youth and young manhood is Georgia, whom he, David, and Tom are all courting. She is their cultural guru and sex goddess, convinced that she has inherited the soul of Isadora Duncan, that epitome of style. "Without style you're dead ducks, kid-dos," she assures her swains. Danilo writes her love poems but when she decides that "my days as a virgin are drawing to a close" and offers herself, he hesitates and is lost.

The friends separate and somehow the Tesich spell—woven as before from the familiar trivia of youth and from recognition of the bonds and angers and understandings of family relationships—is shattered. The story's ambitions begin to show when Danilo goes off to college and becomes involved with the very rich, with lurid melodrama and inklings of incest. This is, we realize, a structured story of "success" and its emptiness; of "roots," as Danilo goes wandering in search thereof;

of "obsession" as Georgia, having bedded Tom and wedded David and gone off to find herself, comes wandering in and out of Danilo's life in a series of incredible coincidences that leave him slaving. And it is, of course, the story of "an era," as we glance in passing at Freedom Riders and peace demonstrators, see Georgia as a hippie, and Danilo with and then without a beard.

But finally we realize that we have been given contrived reportage about four people who are ultimately reunited. We are shown the ties but never quite understand why they bind.

Penn has taken pains to cast relative unknowns. Craig Wasson gives Danilo a resilience and a blend of strength and naivete; Reed Birney is remarkable indeed as Danilo's college roommate whose warmth and humor transcend a crippling illness; and Miklos Simon and



Four Friends (from top): Craig Wasson, Tim Metzler, Jodi Thelen, Michael Huddleston.

Elizabeth Lawrence are superb Slavic Gothic as Danilo's unassimilated parents. Jodi Thelen exudes a small-town-siren appeal, but beyond offering the pathos of a young woman suddenly "tired of being young," she remains small-town. They all suit their time and place and echo familiar situations. With Penn, Tesich has looked back with a clear eye, but it is ultimately blurred by allegations of significance. The "message" stands in the way of the movie—and we are ultimately only onlookers.

There's a male-female relationship at the center of **Butterfly**, too—but this one is incestuous. James M. Cain's 1947 novel comes to the screen adapted, produced, and directed by Matt Cimber. Set in 1937 on the Nevada-Arizona border, it is, despite the desert locale, a steamy tale of a church-going man's reunion with his 17-year-old daughter, Kady. The caretaker of a now-defunct silver mine, Daddy had been deserted 10 years before by his wife—named Belle, of course—who left with her lover and two young daughters. Now the younger daughter arrives, ostensibly to seduce Daddy, but actually, we soon learn, to steal some silver from the mine because the owner's son fathered her baby and refused to defy his parents and marry her.

Well, it's hard on Daddy, especially when he has to massage her aching back in the bathtub after a hard day stealing silver from the mine (they manage to get out and take to town—in one unnoticed load—enough ore to net them some 15 pounds of pure silver at 90 cents an ounce). Kady's sister, baby, and ready-for-marriage beau arrive to underline Daddy's paternal guilts; even Belle arrives, with her lover. She dies on the verge of Telling All, but it's her lover who then taunts Daddy with *The Secret*. This prompts Daddy to murder him, louse up Kady's wedding plans, and leap on her lustfully. Someone, however, *Has Been Watching* and the two are arrested for incest. At the pre-trial hearing *The Truth* comes out—anybody here remember *The Birthmark Bit*? Everybody has a happy ending except Dad who—it's the hallmark of Cain—has the corpse of Belle's lover to cope with.

This two-penny nonsense is worth detailing only because Stacy Keach is effective as the "quiet" man battling with lust; Lois Nettleton contributes a touching cameo as the worn-out Belle; Orson Welles, bespectacled and bearded, has an absolute ball in a couple of courtroom scenes as a feisty old judge; and Ann Dane makes a mark as the shy elder sister. The film "introduces" Pia Zadora, a 20-year veteran of stage musicals and nightclubs (she began in her childhood), as the 17-year-old Kady. A tousle-haired petite blonde costumed in see-through low-cut dresses and seemingly nothing else, she flings her body about in sinuous style. It is unfortunate that the heavy, pasty-faced makeup, presumably applied to make her look like a teenager, detracts from her charms. ■

Two Cheers for Two Plays

The Pulitzer Prize for drama is looking up—a little, anyway. Since 1957, when it was given to America's greatest play, O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, the only time the Pulitzer award hasn't made me cringe at least slightly was when it went to Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* two years ago. This year it has gone to a first play by Beth Henley called **Crimes of the Heart**, produced off-Broadway in 1980 and now moved to Broadway, in which a limited but authentic dramatist's voice can be heard.

The success of the play is, to some extent, a victory over this production. Henley is a Mississippian who writes about small-town life in her home state, and this has been taken as an almost arbitrary injunction to treat her play like one more slice off a standard Southern loaf. In point of fact, Henley is a quietly tenacious pursuer of horror, a writer shaken into pitch-black comedy by the buried terrors in the superficially smooth, tabby-cat lives she has seen. The trouble with the tone of this production directed by Melvin Bernhardt is that, for too long a time, it leads you to expect one more hyperdetailed, gabby decline into hominy-grits entropy. The play has figuratively to fight its way through the opening half hour or so of this production before it lets the author establish what she is getting at—that, under this molasses meandering, there is madness, stark madness; and that the only factor that keeps these characters out of asylums (insofar as they *are* kept out) is their mad humor about themselves, which translates almost chillingly into our looking at them as comic.

The play concerns three sisters. (Forget Chekhov—there's no connection.) They are played by: Lizbeth Mackay as the sister who lives in the house whose kitchen we see; Mia Dillon as the sister who has just returned from her home with her husband nearby; and Mary Beth Hurt as the sister who has just returned from Los Angeles. As the play opens, Mackay comes into the (mammoth) kitch-



MARTHA SMOPE

Hurt, Mackay, and Dillon portray three Southern sisters in *Crimes of the Heart*.

en, puts a birthday candle in a cookie, and silently sings "Happy Birthday"; and my teeth clenched in readiness for another drawling ode to Loneliness. But in contrast to this opening tonality, here are some of the matters that come to light. Mackay is much more upset about the death of an old horse than by her grandfather's stroke and coma. Dillon has shot her husband because she doesn't like his looks and, while he lay bleeding, offered him lemonade; as part of his criminal prosecution of her, he sends her lawyer some photographs of her taken *in flagrante* with a 15-year-old black boy; she says the pictures will ruin her but manages to forget about them completely for 20 minutes or so. And Hurt, who comes on in a mini skirt as the standard Hollywood returnee who has been lying to her family about her career, discloses that she has been hospitalized for psychosis. In short, what begins as more wistfulness under the wisteria eventually becomes a compound of giggle and decay on the edge of an abyss.

I take Henley as serious, not as a parodist—a lightweight daughter of Faulkner rather than a diluted Tennessee Williams. This opinion is strengthened by a reading of her subsequent play, *The Miss Firecracker Contest*, which has

already been produced in Dallas and in Jackson, Mississippi, and which continues to probe the grotesquely comic vein of horror in a small town in her state. And still another play of hers, *The Wake of Jamey Foster*, will have been produced in Hartford, Connecticut, by the time this review appears. She is 29.

To praise Dillon and Mackay and Hurt would be like praising a jeweler for fixing a watch: If he can't do that, what *can* he do? For competent actors, these roles are easy—which is to compliment the author, not knock the performers. Bernhardt's approach, to let the horror seep in slowly, is better suited to conventional suspense than to a play that needs an index of its import from the start. It isn't blatant weirdness that's wanted, but something akin to what Eric Thompson did with Ayckbourn's *Absurd Person Singular* or Charles Marowitz (in London) with Orton's *Loot*, where we were subtly but swiftly informed that the play was stranger than it seemed to be.

Crimes has faults. Too much of the action occurs offstage and is reported. Frequently Henley uses an irritating device: Character B repeats the last words of what Character A has just said. ("She shot him in the stomach." "In the stomach?") But she has struck a rich, if