
THE TALKIES



THRILLERS

by Bruce Bawer

As the Cookin' Cajun on PBS would say, Jim McBride's new film *The Big Easy* is big on *at-mose-phere*. The picture opens with a series of helicopter's-eye views of the Mississippi delta and a generous helping of sultry, down-home Loo-siana style background music. The movie is grainy-looking, almost as if it were shot on 16mm stock, and it has an overcast look, for the most part, as if it were filmed on a couple of cloudy weekends in October. The idea here, apparently, is not to look *slick*—McBride wants a gritty, homey, y'all-take-ya-shoes-off tone. The film's setting, of course, is New Orleans, where Remy McSwain (Dennis Quaid) is the youngest man on the police force ever to be promoted to the rank of lieutenant. (Catch dat name, Remy? Dat's *at-mose-phere*.) Remy's from a police family: half the members of the force seem to be related to him. And they all have thick, syrupy Cajun accents.

Indeed, just about everybody in the film talks Cajun, with the major exception of Ann Osborne (Ellen Barkin), a Yankee-born-and-bred assistant district attorney who, Remy complains, "bust[s] cops for a living." This intelligent, strong-minded Yankee blonde is a strict believer in law and order who frowns on the easygoing way in which Remy and his Cajun-drawlin' colleagues enjoy their "perks." Remy tries to soften Ann up by taking her out for dinner, but when the meal turns out to be free—"his money's no good here," the restaurateur explains to Ann—she's incensed. How, she wants to know, is this any different from accepting a bribe? Remy tries to explain: "This is New Orleans. We have a certain way of doing things down here. Folks like to show their appreciation." He claims that there's a difference between taking advantage of "perks" and being a criminal—the real criminals are muggers, killers, burglars. "We're the good guys. We're all that stands between you and them, sugar." But she's implacable.

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Remy doesn't give up, however. Ann turns him on, and before long it's clear that his cocky charm is getting to her, too, in spite of everything. For a while these two remind one, just a little bit, of Tracy and Hepburn—he the laid-back, plain-talking man's man (who, we know, will prove capable of tenderness), she the high-strung, high-toned, no-nonsense career woman (who, we know, will prove capable of passion). Of the two Ann is the more interesting character, and when Remy finally does bed her down, she becomes even more interesting—an endearing combination of shyness, self-possession, and sensuality.

But *The Big Easy* ceases to be a latter-day Tracy-and-Hepburn film when Remy's arrested red-handed for taking graft from the owner of a topless bar. He goes to court (in what must be record time—less than a week after his arrest!) and Ann (who else?) is the prosecuting attorney. She's now full of contempt for him—and her contempt increases when his pals at the police department manage to get him off by destroying the evidence against him. "You're supposed to uphold the law," she snarls, "but instead you bend it and twist it and sell it. . . . You're not one of the good guys anymore." No *Adam's Rib*, this. It takes a series of local murders—which Remy at first attributes to a "drug war" among rival

factions of the local mob, but which Ann suspects, correctly, to involve corrupt police officials—to make Remy forsake his family loyalty to the police department and its sleazy ways and to rejoin the "good guys."

The Big Easy is not a movie, then, that is calculated to warm the hearts of the Patrolmen's Benevolent Association. It appears to pride itself on its clear-eyed, unsentimental view of things. Rough as it is on cops, however, it's amazingly soft on assistant D.A.'s: Ann Osborne doesn't seem to have any political ambitions or, for that matter, any ulterior motives whatsoever; she believes purely in truth, justice, and the American way, and so apparently do her colleagues at the D.A.'s office. What a lovely fiction!

The movie appears to pride itself, too, on its realistic *at-mose-phere*. But, though I've never been to New Orleans, it seemed to me that there were too many people in this film with Cajun accents; in New Orleans these days, the Cajuns are a small, colorful minority, aren't they? I'm informed by folks who know the city well that I'm right: the majority of its Caucasian residents are of Irish, Italian, or German heritage; the Cajuns are essentially a rural phenomenon.

This sort of thing would not be so

disturbing except for the impression one gets, every so often, that McBride (who previously directed the Richard Gere epic *Breathless*) would like us to take this movie more seriously than it deserves. But the truth is that whereas *The Big Easy* is a genuinely entertaining romantic thriller—a glossy Hollywood picture with some of the gloss removed—it hardly provides a realistic view of New Orleans, of the judicial system, or (I suspect) of the real nature of institutional corruption. When Remy gives his heartfelt climactic speech about the way corruption, er, corrupts, it seems more forced than forceful; certainly it is nowhere near as dramatically powerful a moment as the makers of this film seem to think it is.

A couple of other quibbles: the sound is rather poor, the cinematography murky. But the film has energy and wit, and is blessed with a number of splendid performances. Ned Beatty is particularly good as a cop named Jack who's like a second father to Remy; and the late Charles Ludlam is weirdly amusing as a dandified defense lawyer right out of Tennessee Williams. Both the lead actors, moreover, are very appealing. Quaid had better be careful, though, or his prominent performances in this movie, as Gordon Cooper in *The Right Stuff*, and as the fantastic voyager in the recent *Innerspace* will stereotype him forever as the cocky-but-lovable type.



Roger Donaldson's *No Way Out* is yet another recent thriller in which a diverting plot has been yoked to an outsized moral about corruption within The System. Kevin Costner, who portrayed the terminally earnest Eliot Ness in this summer's *The Untouchables*, here plays yet another clean-cut, quietly forceful government man, Lieutenant Commander Tom Farrell. Like Remy McSwain, Farrell is a cocky fellow whose gifts have taken him very far for someone so young. A veteran of Naval Intelligence who is attached to the *USS Billings*, Farrell is brought back to Washington by his friend Scott

Pritchard (Will Patton), the right-hand man of Secretary of Defense David Brice (Gene Hackman). Brice wants to kill plans for an expensive sub called the Phantom, which he considers unnecessary but for which a Southern committee chairman named Duvall (Howard Duff)—with the support of CIA reports on Soviet naval buildup—has been lobbying hard; Farrell's assignment is to serve as liaison between the secretary and the intelligence community—especially the CIA, whose closely guarded raw data on Soviet sea power Brice wants him to obtain.

The film's extraordinarily convoluted plot revolves not around the Phantom sub controversy, however, but around a murder. Several months before going to work for Brice, Farrell meets a striking young lady named Susan Atwell (Sean Young) at an inaugural ball and—in what has become the film's most publicized sequence—makes love to her in the back seat of a limousine.

A romance develops between them, although Farrell knows that Susan is the well-paid mistress of someone high up in government; Susan eventually confesses that the man in question is none other than Farrell's own boss, David Brice. Brice isn't aware of Susan's affair with Farrell, however; he doesn't realize she's been two-timing him until one night when he shows up at her house and sees Farrell—whom he doesn't recognize in the dark—leaving by the back way. Incensed, Brice slaps Susan around and inadvertently kills her. He goes straight to Pritchard, who comes up with a plan to save his skin: they'll declare that Susan was the mistress of, and was murdered by, a Soviet mole in the Defense Department named Yuri, whose existence has long been suspected by the CIA. This fiction will make it possible to keep the D.C. police out of the case, and to have a DOD hireling track down Susan's other boyfriend (the sole witness to Brice's appearance at her apartment on the night of the murder) and, on the pretense that he is Yuri, to have him killed. Naturally, the job of finding this "Yuri" is given to Brice's intelligence expert—Farrell.

Follow that? From there on it gets *really* convoluted, and, alas, sillier and sillier. There's the requisite chase scene, of course—in which Farrell hightails it through Rock Creek Park, a couple of Special Forces agents nipping at his heel—and another murder. But the whole film comes down in the end to a ridiculous race between two computers in the basement of the Pentagon. One of these computers, by means of a process the explanation of which didn't sound quite kosher to me, is gradually turning an all-black photo-

graphic negative found in Susan's house into an image of Farrell—and Farrell knows that the moment he's recognizable in the picture, Pritchard will have him killed. The other computer is printing out the Office of Protocol's gratuity gift list. Farrell hopes to find a reference on this list to a jewelry box which a Moroccan diplomat gave to Brice, and which was among the items found in Susan's house; to Farrell's mind, this is apparently the only way of establishing definitively that Brice himself was Susan's lover—and murderer. One wonders why Farrell doesn't simply ask the computer to search the file for mention of the jewelry box—a process that would take a few moments—instead of having it spend hours printing out the whole list; but this is the sort of movie in which the only real explanation is that, well, if he did *that*, there wouldn't be any movie.

The film has some things going for it: a few genuinely suspenseful moments, a couple of arresting reversals, a lively pace; for such a baroquely plotted picture, it moves along quite smoothly most of the way through. The acting is good, too: Costner brings to his role the same wonderful controlled intensity that made him so impressive in *The Untouchables*; Hackman offers a wise portrayal of a man who's not really malevolent, just cowardly; and Will Patton delivers a bravura performance as the psychopath who's determined to "save Brice no matter what it takes." But the most remarkable presence is that of Sean Young, whose vivacity, sensuality, and naturalness bring to mind the screen icons of generations ago. Every moment that she is on screen, the film has life, vigor, charm; she makes this silly thriller seem more distinctive than it is, makes these hokey proceedings seem *real*. The moment her character dies, the movie's dreary contrivance becomes manifest.

Like *The Big Easy*, this is a film that patently prides itself on its supposedly authentic *mise en scène*, its familiarity with the way things work in the corridors of power. But people I know in D.C. have been laughing it up over certain details in this film—for instance, over the anachronistic depiction of Duvall, the Senate committee chairman, as a bossy, drawling Southerner. What's more, though the film is competently shot and edited for the most part, there is one slip-up that particularly bothered me: when Brice and Pritchard are shown dining *al fresco* at the Hay-Adams Hotel, the film unit's big, white production vehicles are plainly visible in the background.

In the final analysis, *No Way Out* is yet another '80s romantic thriller, not much better or worse than—or, ultimately, different from—a score of others which have not only interchangeable titles (e.g., *Against All Odds*) but interchangeable pop-rock title songs of surpassing insipidity. (Like these other films, *No Way Out* forces you to listen to its theme song several times before the picture's through, the idea apparently being that

if it irritates you enough you'll run right out and buy the record.) Aside from Miss Young's performance, in fact, the main thing that distinguishes this movie from other romantic thrillers of the day is its ending: I don't intend to give it away, but suffice it to say that the film's last moments contain a cheap dramatic twist that violates the most basic rules of dramaturgy and that sent this viewer, for one, out of the theater feeling cheated. □

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BOOK REVIEWS

Every biography is inevitably a funeral, the intention being to place the subject in his proper place in history, which is to say, securely underground. In the case of the literary biography the difficulty increases with the size of the writer's corpus, his renown, and the breadth of his influence. It comes as little surprise, then, that the French, and in particular the French left, have had some difficulty disposing of the corpse of Jean-Paul Sartre, who in addition to writing four novels, half a dozen plays, four major works of philosophy, three progressively excessive biographies, and numberless essays, articles, prefaces, short stories, and statements of support, also defined the very image of the leftist intellectual in the public mind for several decades. Sartre's complete works have yet to be collected, much less published, and it is possible that they never will be. And the literary contribution of Sartre—whose essays reflecting upon the deaths of Albert Camus, fellow phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty, Third World revolutionary Franz Fanon, and the writer Paul Nizan served as his subjects' literary tombstones—has yet to be convincingly assessed.

Annie Cohen-Solal's biography of Sartre begins fittingly enough with the scene of a literary auction where Sartre's manuscripts, published and unpublished, are disappearing into the hands of anonymous buyers. The manuscripts, perhaps because of their very number, are selling poorly. Sartre, once placed alongside Victor Hugo in the pantheon of French letters, has become a drag on the market. Cohen-Solal writes: "Since Sartre's death, in April 1980, his work has been going through a period of uncertainty, a strange malaise of which this auction was probably the least painful symptom. And yet, this mysterious dance of the manuscripts—appearance, disappearance, chance of imminent reappearance—suggested a constant movement around Sartre's oeuvre, a perpetual mobility, an afterlife."

The undead Sartre presents his would-be gravediggers with a variety of problems. First of all, how to classify him: novelist or philosopher, literary recluse or political activist, iconoclast or dogmatic Marxist? In each instance the answer is both, yet neither. Sartre's

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SARTRE: A LIFE
Annie Cohen-Solal/Pantheon Books/\$24.95

Crocker Coulson

most powerful novel, *Nausea*, was conceived as a "factum on contingency," an exploration of a philosophical problem; his great work on ontology, *Being and Nothingness*, is a highly technical work illustrated with novelistic anecdotes. The champion of a theory of literary engagement, in which every word an author writes must further the cause of human liberation, Sartre was profoundly uninterested in political events during the most productive periods of his life. Finally, Sartre, who resolutely refused to join any political party, who founded the shortlived Resistance group "Socialism and Freedom" as a third way between the Communists and the followers of De Gaulle, and who in his existentialist phase was castigated by the Communist Party for his "bourgeois decadence and morbidity," became in his later life one of the most unabashed apologists for totalitarian barbarism around the world. This is the paradoxical, unnerving reflection that Sartre presents to the

unaffiliated, contentious, hyper-intellectual political class that travels in France under the rubric of *la gauche*.

Sartre's childhood, with his passionate love for his widowed mother, his infancy spent among the great works of the nineteenth century in the library of his Alsatian grandfather, and his precocious, insatiable egoism, has long been known through the exquisite piece of mythmaking that Sartre published as an autobiography entitled *The Words*. Cohen-Solal manages to round out the deceptive portrait Sartre painted of these years, uncovering a wealth of new information about the father whose existence Sartre often sought to deny and correcting the faulty chronology and small falsifications that permeate Sartre's more poetic account.

Despite the psychological significance of Sartre's childhood, it is at the Ecole Normale Supérieure and the two

years spent in preparation for it as a *khâgneux* that Sartre's intellectual development truly begins. His circle of normaliens—Raymond Aron, Simone de Beauvoir, Paul Nizan, the psychoanalyst Daniel Lagache, and Merleau-Ponty—formed a loosely knit group that would later define the intellectual landscape of the 1940s and fifties. Cohen-Solal's account evokes the combination of material privation and intellectual overstimulation that characterized life at the most elite of France's Grandes Ecoles. In a letter home Sartre describes "conditions of life [that] violate the most elementary hygienic norms. The dormitory is practically never aired or swept. Dust grows under the bed and impregnates our clothes, saturates the air we breathe." But the Ecole Normale was also an intellectual hothouse, dedicated to the pursuit of "pure spirit" and to endowing its students with the broad philosophical, literary, and historical sophistication that is the trademark of the French intellectual.

And despite the regimentation and poverty, Sartre was undoubtedly happy. Here he developed his mental powers through intellectual combat with his contemporaries: Nizan in the case of literature, Aron in philosophy. In both instances Sartre began at a disadvantage but eventually outstripped his adversaries. Aron later described their relationship thus: "[Sartre] had a new theory every week, every month. . . . He was the one who developed the ideas and I was the one who discussed them." As Aron relentlessly ripped apart Sartre's theories they became stronger, and Sartre's philosophical style increasingly assertive and audacious, as he outlined the preoccupations that would eventually be given form in *Nausea*. And though Sartre was relatively ignorant of the political issues of the day, he began to develop a political style marked by confrontation, an instinctual anarchism, and a pitiless contempt for the upholders of social convention, moral propriety, and intellectual laxity. These upholders Sartre labeled *les salauds*.

At the Ecole Normale, Sartre was known as the class jester—instigating pranks, penning lewd rhymes, performing bitterly satirical plays—all indulged by the Ecole's professors. The keen edge of his humor became apparent in 1927 when during a period of increasing bellicosity in French society, Sartre and a cell of pacifist students staged a theatrical revue that ridiculed

