



## Friends of Bill

by James Bowman

Well, I *said* I wanted movies to eschew fantasy and present us with characters and situations of immediate relevance to our own lives. And then along came *Falling Down* by Joel Schumacher, a self-conscious attempt to present us with Everyman amidst the frustrations of our highly complex, highly frustrating post-industrial society. Michael Douglas plays a man named Bill (oddly called D-FENS, after his vanity license plate, in the credits) who has lost his job, his wife, and his child, and, one day, proceeds to lose his self-control. Caught in a traffic jam in Los Angeles, he finally snaps, abandons his car, and announces that he is “going home” on foot—even though he no longer has a home to go to.

Thereafter he meets representatives of various of the dark forces that haunt our nightmares about modern urban living, and a lot of the petty annoyances—overpriced soft-drinks, foreign shopkeepers, snotty waitresses, bad food, etc.—that on our increasingly frequent bad days seem to push us beyond endurance. Bill is having the ultimate in bad days and, having been pushed beyond endurance, bops each of these insults to his emotional tranquility right on the nose, taking a baseball bat to the price-gouging Korean shopkeeper, for example, or shooting up a Whammyburger restaurant where he finds himself three minutes too late for breakfast.

Talk about relevance! But although such stuff may give us a cheap cathartic high, in the end it is just more fantasy. What’s more, it is fascist fantasy. Those middle-class blues getting you down? Reach for your revolver and squeeze off a few rounds at foreigners or rich people

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or government bureaucrats or young punks or whatever minority you have decided to blame for causing all your problems. That Schumacher is aware of the political implications of his film is shown by the fact that he introduces into it a Nazi sympathizer (Frederic Forrest), with whom Bill has the following dialogue:

NAZI (*having shown Bill an empty container of Zyklon B from the death camps*): We’re just alike, you and I.

BILL (*in disgust*): We are not the same. I am an American and you are a sick a--hole.

Phew! That’s all right then. He’s not a Nazi because he *says* he’s not. In fact, the only person in the film whose death we know is directly attributable to Bill is the Nazi. Doesn’t that demonstrate his bona fides?

No, it doesn’t. But a lot of people must have wanted to believe it does. Caryn James, the *New York Times* critic, to her credit sees Bill as the fascist he is, but then jumps to a conclusion exactly 180 degrees wrong: “Hollywood may have voted for Bill Clinton, but ‘Falling Down’ masterfully exploits conservative sentiments,” she opines. It is “the last big Bush-era movie, custom-made for the rabidly conservative Rush Limbaugh crowd that sees social blight as proof that America is lost in a liberal wilderness.” Such a truly wacky statement shows that not only can she not have listened to Rush Limbaugh, she cannot even have listened to the movie—or its screenwriter, Ebbe Roe Smith, as quoted in her own newspaper a couple of weeks before.

In a piece in the same “Arts and Leisure” section of the *Sunday Times* on February 21, Aljean Harmetz quotes

Smith as saying that Bill, his hero, is “someone who bought the American dream, and it’s blown up in his face. He’s a guy who believed the unspoken promise of America that if you worked hard and were white and a man, you were safe.” Unspoken indeed! Who ever thought that the American dream was about making the world safe for white men? Only the left, of course, whose alternative American dream is the perennial fantasy of making the world safe for everybody—or everybody but individualists and entrepreneurs.

That leftward bias is equally plain in the movie: the evil Nazi is associated with anti-gay, anti-feminist, and anti-environmentalist views, just in case anti-Semitism by itself is not enough to distinguish him from Bill. The latter, by contrast, gives voice to more acceptable socialist views by calling, for example, for country clubs to be taken away from the rich and opened to picnicking families. There is even a sneer at anti-Communism when Bill’s old mother, a spaced out weirdo who collects tiny figurines, describes her son’s job (which she has never realized he’s lost) as “building important things to protect us from the Communists”—as if only a ditzzy old broad like that could ever have believed we *needed* protection from the Communists. It is typical of the film’s self-contradiction, its pacifistic, leftist fascism, that it should attempt to milk our sympathy for Bill as a victim of cutbacks in the defense industry at the same time that it suggests there need have been no defense industry in the first place.

In fact, Bill is the perfect Clinton Democrat, which may be the reason for both his first name and the filmmakers’ pretense that he doesn’t have one. He is the embodiment of all that moaning and groaning about a middle-class

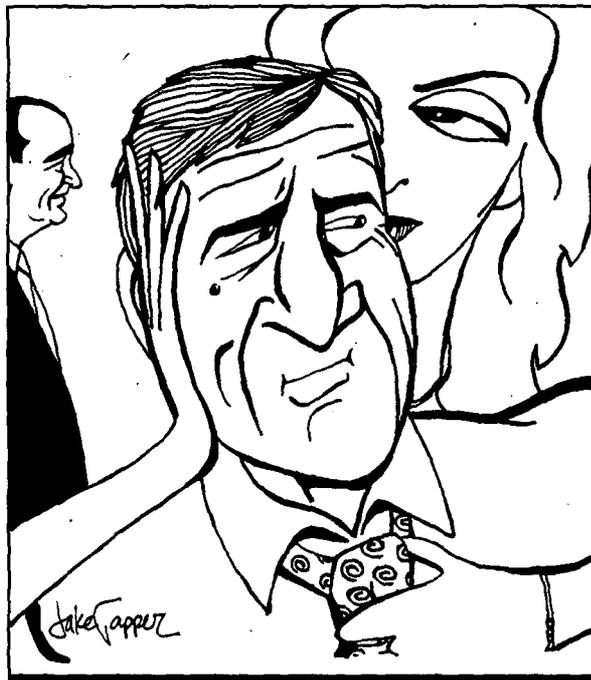
*Götterdämmerung* that worked so much in Clinton's favor last year. The film deliberately distances us from him in the end, but it is clear that he stands for that same "forgotten middle class" whose frustrations, as it was widely supposed in the election campaign, would undoubtedly lead to some secular apocalypse unless a savior like Bill Clinton came along to minister to them. It is this dangerous belief that the most basic of life's problems have political solutions which has led both to the Democratic hegemony and to a fascist fantasy like *Falling Down*. And Caryn James wants to blame George Bush and Rush Limbaugh?

Fascist or otherwise, fantasy as I have observed before is very hard to get away from in Hollywood. The movie people are perhaps at their best when they recognize the fact and poke a bit of gentle fun at themselves for it. That is why I rather liked *Mad Dog and Glory*—or at least the first half of it. It was a brilliant idea to cast Bill Murray as a ruthless hoodlum in therapy, a sort of yuppie Don whose fantasy is to be a stand-up comic, and Robert De Niro as a rather timid and mild-mannered policeman (hence his ironic nickname, "Mad Dog") whose fantasy is to be a photographic artist. "I got this feeling," says Murray to DeNiro, trying to make friends, "me and you, we both want to be somewhere else. You know what I mean? We're artists." Later on, a third "artist" comes along: Uma Thurman as Glory, a would-be actress who is working for Murray as a barmaid and prostitute. She delivers the film's most memorable line: "Life is what happens to you while you're waiting for your ship to come in."

Alas, these very promising materials are not exploited to the full and the film soon becomes much more predictable: a love story between Mad Dog and Glory and the saga of how the former manages to overcome his timidity, challenge the bully, and win the fair maiden. All the interesting stuff at the beginning is pretty much forgotten. This is what happens to good ideas in Hollywood: they have to be adapted to one of the standard scenarios, variations on which are continually

replayed, and these squeeze out such marginal concerns as originality or coherence.

What is fascinating is to see the same process at work in a dramatization from real life like *Fire in the Sky*. This is the film that promises an answer, based on actual experience, to the question of what extraterrestrials are really like. The answer it gives is that they must be pretty much like a cross between *Alien* and *E.T.* But, when you think about it, what can a film do with a supposedly true story of a man kidnapped by aliens? There is no language, no imagery with which to represent extraterrestrials but that of the alien movies that we've all seen many times before. So for the "true" story as much as for the fantasy you have to call up Industrial Light and Magic and tell them to design some generic space



tourists. Naturally, what they come up with is a saucer-shaped spaceship filled with big-headed, spindly-limbed, wrinkly-faced creatures that look like angry potatoes—or perhaps like *E.T.* in a stocking mask. How else would we know they were aliens?

As usual, truth—or "truth"—limps haltingly along behind fiction and looks far less true than even fantasy. Perhaps the only thing for a film to do about this problem is to bow toward truth by making fun of its own fictions in the thoroughgoing, post-mod-

ern way. That is what happens in the Movie of the Month, the Australian film *Strictly Ballroom* by Baz Luhrmann, which on one level is a straightforward Cinderella story that gets away with being so incredibly corny by making fun of the conventions of Cinderella stories (and of movies, and of ballroom dancing) on other levels. It is a very funny picture, but it never allows itself to become merely knowing and arch toward its characters or their story. They are not idiots, as in heavy-handed parodies like *Naked Gun* or *Hot Shots* or *Loaded Weapon*, but likable kids whose happy ending we root for as much as we ever did for Cinderella's.

Paul Mercurio plays Scott, a dancer who has got it into his head that he can win the Pan-Pacific Ballroom Championship by doing his own steps. The Australian Dance Federation and its sinister head conspire with his own mother to prevent him from going ahead with his plan, his partner deserts him and he is left with plain, wallflowerly Fran (Tara Morice), who sweeps the dance studio, as the only person who believes in him. "Can you dance without those?" he asks, referring to her spectacles, and when they come off she of course turns into a raving beauty and a fantastic dancer. Moreover, she comes from a whole family of Spanish dancers who can teach Scott how to do his new steps in the fashion of the *paso doble*.

All the clichés of the genre are trotted out, but instead of being knocked over the head as in a traditional satire they are respectfully and lovingly treated, dressed up, and introduced into the tempest-in-teapot world of professional ballroom dancing. Their triteness is exaggerated to the point of ridiculousness—which, paradoxically, makes them look touchingly fresh and believable once more. Our enjoyment of the young couple's happiness after many vicissitudes is sanitized and made safe for us by all the self-mockery we have sat through up to this point. It's okay to love this stuff, the hip post-modernist tells us, so long as you also laugh at it. Maybe it's not much of a compromise with the movies' sinister tendency towards fantasy, but it is the best we are likely to get. □

In the final eight years of his working life—which ended in November 1948, when he suffered a stroke that left him permanently unable to read or write—H. L. Mencken saw six important books to press: the three *Days* volumes, the two *Supplements to The American Language*, and *A New Dictionary of Quotations*. He also composed, or was at work on, two memoirs that, in

accordance with the terms of his will, were “not to be open to anyone, under any circumstances whatever, until either January 1, 1980, or thirty-five years after the death of the author, whichever may be the later.” Thus, the heavy wooden boxes containing the manuscripts remained sealed until January 29, 1991. And now, two years later, we have in print the first of the volumes, *My Life as Author and Editor*, superbly edited by Jonathan Yardley. The other memoir, *Thirty-Five Years of Newspaper Work, 1906-41*, is forthcoming from the Johns Hopkins University Press.

Near the end of this delightful and dumbfounding record, Mencken remarks that though the year 1921 was a busy one for him he accomplished little that was of any lasting significance. His trouble, he correctly concludes, was that he had too many jobs. At which point he enters into the record a brief excerpt from a letter he wrote to Fielding H. Garrison on February 23, 1921:

I am rewriting *The American Language* (8 hours a day), helping to edit the *Smart Set* and the *Black Mask*, advising the editors of two other magazines, doing an article a week for the *Sun*, sitting in at least one long *Sun* conference a week, and doing casual stuff for the *Nation*, the *Post*, and the *Century*. In addition, I do a 6,000 word book article a month, write over half of

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MY LIFE AS AUTHOR AND EDITOR

H. L. Mencken  
(Edited by Jonathan Yardley)

Alfred A. Knopf / 450 pages / \$30

reviewed by WILLIAM H. NOLTE

Repetition Generale, and most of the “Conversations.” Also, I am working upon *Prejudices III*, and editing a MS. for Dreiser. In brief, I am a damned fool.

But then Mencken seemed to be incapable of performing only two or three jobs at once.

Not long after reaching this point (in the narrative), Mencken suffered his stroke. Thus, we learn little about the *American Mercury*, certainly the most important magazine published in America during the years of Mencken’s editorship (1924-33). It was during that period, as Yardley notes, that Mencken “towered over the American scene as has no other literary or journalistic figure before or since.” Still, the great service he performed for the National Letters preceded the founding of the *Mercury*. By far his most important book of literary criticism, *A Book of Prefaces*, appeared in 1917. It would be nigh impossible to overestimate the influence on literary Americans of that volume’s long article “Puritanism as a Literary Force.” Also appearing before he left the *Smart Set* were the first three of the *Prejudices* volumes.

Neither in the *Days* books nor in *The Diary*, which created such a silly furor when it appeared in 1989, do we see Mencken as sharply as we do here. But what sets *My Life* apart from other memoirs of the period is its vast gallery of portraits, most of them of the people Mencken met while he and

George Jean Nathan were coediting the *Smart Set*.

Although he had, by about 1920, tired of the *Smart Set*—including its title, the paper on which it was printed, and the great emphasis it traditionally placed on fiction and poetry for its content—Mencken seldom gets far from that forum; he constantly refers to his bi-monthly visits to the New York office, and to the wide assortment of people

he entertained (or was entertained by) during the four-day stays. Soon or late, Mencken got to know most of the writers whose work appeared in the *Smart Set*—that is to say, most of the important writers of the teens and twenties. Among those appearing in the magazine between 1916 and 1923 (I take the list from a study of Mencken’s literary criticism that I wrote many years ago) were Dreiser, Willa Cather, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, George Branch Cabell, Ruth Suckow, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Edgar Lee Masters, Eugene O’Neill, Joseph Wood Krutch, Howard Mumford Jones, Lewis Mumford, Maxwell Anderson, Anita Loos, John Hall Wheelock, Ben Hecht, Dorothy Parker, Waldo Frank, Thomas Beer, Julia Peterkin, and John Peale Bishop. Fitzgerald lamented that he had to sell his best stories, the ones he really sweated over, to Mencken for a paltry three hundred dollars or so, while the ones he knocked out in a day and a night brought two thousand dollars and up from the slicks. Mencken published ten of Fitzgerald’s stories.

Mencken devotes more space to his relations with Dreiser than with anyone else. He certainly saw more of Nathan during those years, but then Nathan was never in need of aid, whereas Dreiser was always in trouble of some sort—and never hesitated to impose upon Mencken’s good nature when trouble arose. Much of that trouble, of course, had to do with Dreiser’s women—that is, with the numerous affairs he had, either simultaneously or seriatim. Mencken remarks that, during the years