

One sunny afternoon in Paris, in my Fulbright year of 1949-50, I was nearly blinded by beauty. I was coming out of an early screening at the Cinémathèque Française just as a young couple was heading in for the next. Everyone stared, transfixed. The man was handsome, elegant, and proudly smiling. But the young woman was triply radiant. There was her slimly impeccable, exquisitely dressed figure. There was her face, at once earthy and aristocratic, and marvelously feline. Above all, there was her coloring: the proverbially alabaster skin, the sun-drenched-sea eyes, the champagne-colored hair—and the perfect harmony into which these colors blended. It was Yves Montand and Simone Signoret, and a luminousness I have never forgotten.

It all came vividly back to me reading Catherine David's *Simone Signoret*. I learn from this biography that Yves and Simone had met at Saint-Paul-de-Vence in August 1949, when each was 28. She immediately left Yves Allégret, her movie-director husband and father of her daughter, to move in with Montand, whom she married two years later. My path crossed theirs during that long, ecstatic prenuptial honeymoon. I never saw Simone Signoret again in the flesh, yet her premature on-screen physical decline some years later affected me almost as strongly as if I had been living with her. But it never obliterated that initial vision.

Simone Henriette Charlotte Kaminker was born in 1921 in Wiesbaden to an officer in the French occupying army, the son of Polish and Austrian Jews, who himself wanted above all to be French; and Georgette née Signoret, his very French middle-class wife. André Kaminker returned to civilian life, and little Kiki grew up in Neuilly, an archetypally bourgeois suburb of Paris. She was much closer to her liberal mother than to her desperately proper father, whose gift for languages she nevertheless inherited,

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SIMONE SIGNORET

Catherine David, translated by Sally Sampson

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reviewed by JOHN SIMON

and who, when things became impossible for Jews in France, escaped to and remained in England. Georgette respected and encouraged Simone's intellectuality, but as the girl grew, she grew away from Neuilly's staid atmosphere and her mother's overprotectiveness.

She began to come of age with her baccalaureate philosophy dissertation, "Define the connections between passion and will," although she scored only 14.5 out of 20, and more fully at the Café Flore, where she scored 20 out of 20. The Flore was the best university in Paris in the forties; not only were Sartre and the existentialists holding forth there, but so, too, was the entire flora of the seven arts, notably writers, theater people, and filmmakers. Simone Kaminker was, with the possible exception of Juliette Gréco, the prettiest girl in attendance, and though she worked for a right-wing newspaper (whose publisher showed real courage in hiring a Jew), became one of the muse-mascots of the café, and absorbed the intellectualized leftism of the place. She also began landing roles in movies and theatricals.

Equally important is what she did not do: join, like so many other artists, the Resistance. Bad conscience about this plagued her throughout her life, and no doubt helped propel her to the left, which was then perceived as the cause of peace and social justice. The theater did not agree with her; her main achievement there was making off with the sandals she wore in a Grecian-style play from which she was fired for giggling; in a previous production, they had been worn by Jean Gabin, whose shoe size matched hers. (Feet were the problem of many glamorous French actresses, Brigitte Bardot and Juliette Gréco included.) In movies,

things went much better, especially when, after brief affairs with the actor Daniel Gélin and the writer Marcel Duhamel, she ended up with the film director Yves Allégret, younger brother of the popular filmmaker Marc Allégret.

Yves, who fathered the actress Catherine Allégret on Simone and eventually married her, was more leftist, more pessimistic, and

more talented than his brother. It was in the leads of two of his bleak films, *Dédée d'Anvers* (1947) and *Manèges* (1949) that Simone Signoret, no longer Kiki Kaminker, achieved stardom, her good English making her employable in that language, too. I saw the films in reverse order, and so, for me, Simone remained the sleek rich bitch of *Manèges* rather than the touching tart of *Dédée* (and a bit later *La Ronde*). Either way, here was an actress who clearly combined talent, intelligence, looks, and versatility, and was headed for great things. Yet when the journalists Tacchella and Théron (as they report in their book *Les Années éblouissantes*) talked to her about stardom, she replied, "I don't have a star's life. They give me parts to play, I'm happy, and I eat to my heart's content. There's nothing else to say."

This pragmatic approach to her work allowed her to remain unspoiled. As Mme David puts it, "She was drawn to anything working class or left wing, and, the sexual side apart, this would be the key to her original attraction to Yves Montand." To recuperate from *Manèges*; she had gone to the charming and still fashionable Colombe d'or at Saint-Paul-de-Vence. There she met Montand under circumstances that have since been glamorized beyond what they actually were. The setting was, admittedly, romantic, and the two artists were looking their casual best.

Montand, whose real name was Ivo Livi, came from an abjectly poor Italian working-class and Communist family who had fled to Marseilles from the Fascists. Young Ivo could not even indulge in the luxury of secondary

school, but worked at various menial jobs that led to his becoming a ladies' hairdresser who entertained the clients with jokes and songs. He started singing professionally from an improvised platform to working-class women, and changed his name. From her window, his mother would call down into the street to him in Italian, "Ivo, monta!" Ivo became Yves; *monta* (come up), Montand.

Through enormously rigorous practice of every kind, he made it to Paris as a singer, becoming for three years the lover of Edith Piaf, from whom he learned a lot. When she left him, he fell back on groupies, of whom—whenever Simone wasn't watching—there was to be a life-long supply. But at first this was the great, absolute love, Montand wanting Simone all to himself, and she ready to give up her career for him. Soon she moved in with Montand—as she always called him, "Yves" being reserved for Allégret—in his apartment in, of all places, Neuilly. Schooled and well-read, she educated Montand; he took her to meet his folks in Marseilles, and for the first time she experienced working-class life.

They never joined the Communist Party, but were its enthusiastic supporters, partly out of guilt feelings. Montand had become *embourgeoisé*, unlike his older brother Julien, who became a Communist official and organizer. The right-wing press sneered at the couple—he with his Bentley, bought from the Prince of Monaco, she with her furs and *haute couture*—but they stayed cool and committed. Later, when both of them changed politics, Montand was to say they had been exploited by the Party. True enough.

Their spirits were lifted when they discovered the apartment on the lovely Place Dauphine in the delightful Ile de la Cité, one of the most desirable spots in all of Paris. They named it the Trailer (Sally Sampson, translating *la Caravane* into British English, calls it the Caravan). Eventually they acquired the entire building, and were able to put up family members, close friends, and not-so-close friends on the designated floors, sometimes housing as many as twenty. Julien and his family lived there until much later, when he and Yves had their biggest political falling out, and the brothers hardly ever spoke again.

The talented Jacques Becker had to use

shrewd psychology to lure Simone back into acting with his *Casque d'or* (1952), which proved to be one of her biggest international successes. A story of love and crime in the working-class Paris quarter of Belleville during the *belle époque* (not so *belle* in Belleville), it displayed Simone, in the words of the critic Georges Sadoul, "in the full bloom of her beauty" and, it might be added, happiness. Simone played Marie, the belle of Belleville, who proves fatal to lovers and enemies alike. Because she wears her golden tresses piled up on her head, she is known as Casque d'or, golden helmet. Signoret was superb in the rustic love scenes, and perhaps even more so in the staggering final scene, watching her essentially innocent lover being guillotined. In Becker's painterly film, fastidiously observing period atmosphere, Simone looked like a cross between a Manet and a Renoir, a lit-



tle fuller than in her earlier films, and glowingly alive.

Montand and Signoret were mutually supportive, she in particular. Not only was she out front, as he wished, for his concerts, and backstage before and after, she also accompanied him on his tours. In literary matters, he was to acquire another mentor besides Simone, their friend Jacques Prévert. In twentieth-century French poetry, Prévert is the sung and unsung hero. Unsung, because the snobs still patronize him; sung, because countless of his poems have been set to music, chiefly by the brilliant Joseph Kosma, but also by many others, and

these *chansons* remain beloved of all. But he was also the author of splendid screenplays, most notably *Les Enfants du paradis*; and it is he who wrote the words for several of Montand's biggest hits, e.g., "Les Feuilles mortes," "Barbara," and "Les Enfants qui s'aiment."

When Yves and Simone were married at the Colombe d'or, Prévert was best man, and Picasso sent a drawing done with something new in France: a felt-tipped pen. It was to be an often turbulent, sometimes rocky, but invigorating marriage until Simone's death from cancer in 1985. As Montand's biographers, Hamon and Rotman, have written elsewhere, Simone "was a sorry housewife but a wonderful hostess. In 35 years of married life she only once—*once*—cooked dinner for Yves Montand: overdone spaghetti (a rash choice)"—because Ivo Livi was an expert on spaghetti. Instead, the cooking was done by a "woman you never, never called 'the maid.'" In due time, the couple acquired a comfortable country house in Autheuil, where Montand had a mini-theater to rehearse in, and many guests came to stay.

Both of them had double careers: he as singer and dramatic movie star; she as movie star and, later, writer. There had to be what Mme David calls "a secret rivalry, probably subconscious, which led them to be constantly shifting the balance from one to the other in the public eye." But there was also the opposite urge, to reinforce the other. Thus on their arrival in America, when the fame of Signoret was at its height, her "main worry," as she said, "was that people would take Montand for an actress's husband."

Yet even their rivalry was useful. It was a sneer from Montand that prodded Simone into accepting the lead in Marcel Carné's *Thérèse Raquin*, the Zola heroine becoming another of her chief successes, prompting the novelist Jean Dutourd to pronounce her "a female Jean Gabin." Sometimes the spouses pooled their talents, as when they appeared—first on stage, later on screen—in the leads of an adaptation of Miller's *The Crucible*, the movie version written by Sartre. In the popular *Sleeping-Car Murders*, daughter Catherine acted as well.

How serious was their Communism? David doesn't mention the incident when, told by the Party to distribute a

Communist Sunday paper in the Tuileries Gardens on May Day morning, they chose to sleep late and send the woman never called "the maid" to do the job. Rebuked by the Party, they expressed remorse, which is what Signoret's Communism was largely about, whereas Montand simply followed in the footsteps of his father and elder brother. The couple remained deaf to accounts of Soviet horrors, but the Hungarian tragedy of 1956 did shake them. Even so, Montand having committed himself to a Russian concert tour, they went amid deep misgivings.

Montand's singing, like Simone's looks and Hermès outfits, duly impressed the Russians; the couple were astounded one evening to be transported to a private dinner with Khrushchev and his top brass. Lecturing him on behalf of French artists about Hungary, they salved their consciences, but achieved only new grounds for subsequent remorse. They noticed none of the misery around them. On a later concert tour in Czechoslovakia, Simone ignored a distant cousin whose husband she might have helped get out of political imprisonment. Many years later, she translated and introduced the woman's memoirs. But it was not till the crushed Prague Spring and two books by victims of Communist "justice" that Simone, in 1969, finally saw the light.

Meanwhile her film career got a boost when Jack Clayton (not, as the book has it in one place, Peter Glenville) cast her in *Room at the Top*. When that film made her, again, a star, the Montands realized a long-standing dream: a trip to America, where Yves was to have a run with a one-man show on Broadway. He was a hit, and sang also at the Academy Awards ceremony where, a bit later, Simone walked away with the Oscar for *Room at the Top*. She then went off to Italy for another movie, while Yves started shooting *Let's Make Love* with one of their many new Hollywood friends, Marilyn Monroe. His knowing no English and having to learn his lines phonetically brought him especially close to his similarly insecure co-star, and a world-famous affair resulted. Simone was outwardly understanding: "Can you think of many men who wouldn't have responded to Marilyn's charm?" Inwardly, she was gravely hurt. It was then that she started hitting the bottle heavily and letting herself go physically to pot.

She invited old age in with open arms, in retaliation or self-defense. But her movie career, like her husband's flourished. Particularly touching was her difficulty, in Costa-Gavras's *The Confession*, with the part of a rabidly Communist wife who leaves her Communist husband unjustly jailed by his party—because that husband was played by her own husband, whom she couldn't think of betraying. Though *he* had affairs on the side (unmentioned in most books), the couple became more than ever emotionally dependent on each other.

Both continued being political, with Montand veering much more sharply to the right, where she did not always follow: "Sometimes Abbott appears without Costello," she commented. Her own interest was mostly in cases where individuals were grossly mistreated for political reasons: "You never know whether the people you're siding with are really innocent or guilty," she remarked. "Most of the time you're siding against those who think that they have the right to side against the accused, when they have no right at all." The French title of Simone's last international hit, *La Vie devant soi* (here called *Madame Rosa*), was prophetic: a new life lay before her, as well as behind her. She gradually discovered writing, and so rediscovered her past and ancestry. In her two autobiographical works and her lengthy novel, she also addressed her Jewish origins, and settled her accounts with Communism. Spending long, systematic hours on her writing despite failing health and fading eyesight, she continued writing to the end (as well as acting), and finished a body of work to be reckoned with.

Madame David's book, regrettably, is not quite worthy of its subject. It commits virtually every error a biography is capable of. Thus it is a psychobiography, more interested in reconstructing Signoret's feelings than in relating the facts of her story. This despite the author's having known the actress only during the last year of her life. And though the book comes with a rudimentary, incomplete filmography, the films are barely, if at all, gone into, even when, as in *Les mauvais Coups*, they bear a striking parallel to Signoret's own life—something unnoticed by the biographer. She does not even sketch in the important

related lives: nothing about the later years of the father, very little about Montand's six years after Simone.

The author does make several honest stabs at defining Signoret's acting style, but the big problem is Mme David's writing style. It often verges on prose poetry, and hardly of the best kind. For example:

I have spent months living with her ghost; it has become an obsession. My loneliness has made friends with hers; in my little study perched in the trees that have woven a green curtain in front of the lycée Fénelon, she has played every part for my benefit—friend, sister, mother and confidante; she has been, in turn, evasive, intensive, open-hearted, irritable, unpredictable, and fascinating.

And so on and on, up to, most characteristically, "Probing her life story, it is my own dream that I am exposing."

There are sloppinesses, authorial as well as translatorial. Sometimes it is the uncritical taking over of a French spelling, "Jdanov" or "Ehrenbourg" for Zhdanov and Ehrenburg. Sometimes there are the author's misspellings: "Obratsov," for the great puppeteer Obratsov; "Plessetskaya," for the magnificent ballerina Maya Plisetskaya; "Berthold" for Bertolt Brecht. And it would be nice if Sally Sampson avoided *enthused*, *anxious* (for eager), and "who [sic] for years they had assumed to be dead."

Still, even this slender and unsteady book does ultimately convey why, two years after Signoret's death, a *Paris-Match* poll soliciting "the twelve most significant French personalities of the century" listed Simone Signoret along with De Gaulle, Schweitzer, Picasso, Marcel Pagnol, and Jean Gabin, with whom, alas, she made only one picture. And although in his final years Montand had a son by a young mistress of long standing, he never married her. As Simone predicted, no one could take her place. Among my cherished possessions, there is a two-CD set, *Jacques Prévert et ses interprètes*, whose high point is the 27-second recitation of a tiny Prévert love poem, "Le Jardin," by Signoret. She reads it with incomparable straightforwardness and authenticity in that low voice so exactly at the border between mellowness and raspiness, which epitomizes for me the troubling beauty of Simone Signoret and her talent. □

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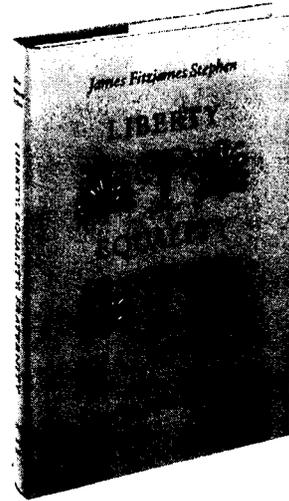
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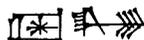
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## BIG BLUES: THE UNMAKING OF IBM

Paul Carroll

Crown / 375 pages / \$24

reviewed by BRIT HUME

**T**his book is a horror story. Expertly reported and engagingly written by *Wall Street Journal* reporter Paul Carroll, *Big Blues* is the tale of how a great, indeed even a noble corporation went from being the most profitable company in history to a basket case in a decade.

It wasn't easy. In 1981, IBM had not only dominated the world computer industry for decades, but seemed poised to do so well into the twenty-first century. It made more computer chips than any company in the world. It had developed the disk drives that are now a part of every computer system. It spent \$8 billion a year on research and development. The company had never laid anyone off and never intended to.

When the microcomputer revolution was born in the garages and basements of hobbyists and hackers in the late 1970s, IBM didn't just sit there. It sent a team off to Boca Raton, Florida, to build what would become the IBM PC, which set a standard for personal computers that nearly every PC in the world would follow.

The Boca group was unusual in that it had a mandate from on high that allowed it to work fast, without clearing everything through IBM's multi-layered decision process. The group made several crucial decisions that would ultimately help the PC succeed and, ironically, help IBM fail. The PC would be an "open system," which meant that most of its basic technology would be non-proprietary. Open

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architecture made the PC easier for outside software companies to write programs for, and helped outside hardware developers to build modems, memory expansion cards, and other products to enhance it.

But the fact that IBM did not own the PC's basic technology opened the way to competition. IBM would be bested in hardware by a number of smaller, more agile firms that were able to bring more powerful PCs to market at lower prices than IBM could, or would. But as much as other hardware makers hurt IBM, nobody hurt it more than the software giant Microsoft and its nerdy, brilliant founder, Bill Gates. At the outset of their decade-long struggle, Carroll writes, IBM had "340,000 employees, \$27 billion of assets, \$26 billion of sales and \$3.6 billion of profits, while Microsoft began their relationship with 32 people and little else. IBM would still find a way to lose."

**T**hroughout most of their battle for control of the personal computer industry, IBM and Microsoft were ostensibly partners. That's because the Boca team contracted with Microsoft to develop the operating system for the original PC. IBM was in a hurry and getting the job done in-house would have taken forever. (No computer can do much of anything without the operating system, which handles such boiler-room functions as managing memory, keeping track of disk drives, loading software, and copying and deleting data.) IBM was prepared to buy the DOS (disk-operating system) software outright from Microsoft for a million dollars, but Gates had other ideas: he wanted a small royalty on every copy

IBM shipped. That was fine with IBM.

Gates's deal allowed Microsoft to sell DOS to any other PC maker it pleased. At the time, of course, there were no other PC makers, and IBM, with the insular view of the world that would contribute so much to its future blunders, no doubt thought there never would be. DOS has been a cash cow for Microsoft, fueling the company's rise from scratch to a value of more than \$25 billion.

Even before its PC came to market, IBM had made mistakes that would cost the company billions, but it was just getting started. The early success of the PC fostered the illusion that the invincibility the company had enjoyed in mainframe systems would continue in the new world of microcomputers. The company worried not about whether its PCs would be competitive with other microcomputers, but whether they would compete with other IBM systems. When IBM brought out the PCjr in 1984, it deliberately made the machine difficult to enhance so that people couldn't expand it into a cheaper version of the PC.

By then, however, there already were cheaper versions of the PC. Other companies' IBM workalikes—the so-called "clones," or "compatibles"—were beginning to flood the market, and people who wanted cheaper PCs bought them. The PCjr was a spectacular, embarrassing flop.

**M**eanwhile, IBM and Microsoft co-developed a new operating system for more advanced PCs called OS/2. It had some new capabilities but it consumed vast amounts of storage and memory, and nobody wanted it. IBM stuck with it, but Microsoft hedged its bets with "Windows" software, a less piggish alternative to OS/2 which Microsoft owns alone, and which has been a smash hit. IBM is still trying to catch up.

*Big Blues* recounts in devastating detail other, less-publicized blunders from the same period:

- A small company called Software Publishing came up with a popular set of basic business programs, the "Assistant Series," which were sold under the IBM label. Software Publishing intended to improve the programs, but IBM decided it should knock out certain