

New York film festival

STEPHEN HARVEY

THE NEW YORK FILM FESTIVAL has always possessed a particular cachet that no rival American event can quite match. Part of its distinction, of course, is just an accident of geography and civic boosterism, since everyone who lives and works between SoHo and 96th Street (including the press) knows that this is the artistic hub of the globe and any film festival programmed here must be the apex of its kind. Just as important is the Festival Committee's much-vaunted reputation for choosiness. New York's annual film buffet never indulges in the excesses associated with, say, Los Angeles's Filmex, which unspools practically every reel of film exposed to light from Hong Kong to the Ivory Coast during the preceding calendar year. At Lincoln Center, just over two dozen programs, retrospectives included, are assembled each year, leading to the widespread assumption that these and only these are the filmic achievements worth noting since the last gathering of the faithful.

Casual attendees may manage to take that notion at face value—after all, they have the option of being even more selective than the festival organizers. Less easily persuaded are those professionally compelled to camp out for the duration in the wooded expanses of Alice Tully Hall. The conditions under which they toil aren't exactly conducive to swoons of excitement. For two weeks, they endure 10 a.m. press screenings, which are spent prying eyelids apart, scribbling illegible notes on spiral pads, and balancing clandestine coffee containers out of the range of the laser-beam

flashlights aimed by the hall's employees (trained to view the press as only a tad less sneaky than the crowd you'd encounter on Rikers' Island).

Yet the disaffection among many of these film journalists is more than simple battle fatigue. After the third or fourth tongue-clucking, talking-head documentary with the guts to come right out and tell us that mental patients mustn't be mistreated, or that the dastardly KKK must be squelched, on top of the opening-night enshrinement of *Charlots of Fire*, that starved-collar *Rocky*, a few doubts about the selection process begin to dawn. Francesco Rosi's *Tre Fratelli*, both a rueful celebration of human continuity and a despairing vision of Italy's current political morass, was the most completely satisfying film I've seen from any quarter this year. After its Cannes premiere, it was offered to the New York Festival, which evidently found it somehow wanting—unlike, say, Antonioni's *Il Mistero di Oberwald*, which turns a second-rate Cocteau play (*L'Aigle à Deux Têtes*) into a fifth-rate Hammer horror film with a pretentious color scheme (pistachio faces, electric-yellow landscapes). *Tighten Your Belts*,

Bite the Bullet—a shrill and static lecture (and I do mean lecture) on the pernicious role of the banks in the recent fiscal crises in Cleveland and New York—would scarcely have passed muster in a PBS Sunday-afternoon slot opposite ABC's "Wide World of Sports." So what in the world was it doing in a prominent berth at Lincoln Center?

Two of this year's direst entries shared at least one discernible function—to play up to the rarefied, vicarious groupiedom that thrives in New York like nowhere else I can think of. Instead of rockers from Styx, the objects of this brand of adulation are *recherché* artistes with a taste for martyrdom and a flair for self-promotion. Both Wim Wenders's *Lightning over Water* and Louis Malle's *My Dinner with Andre* packed a double whammy: Not only did they focus on sure-fire subjects for this sort of cultural beatification, but each was directed by a film maker with unimpeachable claims to idolatry.

Lightning over Water pays tribute to Nicholas Ray, or more accurately, to Wenders's own tender reverence for the benighted director of *Rebel without a Cause*, here captured (trapped?) in the last agonies of his bout with terminal cancer. Narrated by Wenders in a terse, tough-guy mode possibly induced by too many viewings of Philip Marlowe films, *Lightning over Water* is a self-important exploitation movie. Avidly lingering over Ray's emaciated features



My Dinner with Andre

STEPHEN HARVEY is *INQUIRY*'s film reviewer. He is coordinator of the film study program at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

to record his halting, pain-benumbed utterances, it proceeds to goad its semi-comatose star into playing King Lear games for the camera while Wenders drones on about Ray's dignity and eloquence to the last. No doubt Ray was grateful for the attention and the company—in fact, was probably used to it, since his last fifteen years were largely spent in the company of worshipful students and professional disciples. But then, the subject's willing complicity is an alibi all too dear to those documentarists who know an exhibitionistic model when they see one. If Ray was too far gone to realize what a ravaged, helpless apparition would be presented to the film's eventual audience, shouldn't the ever-solicitous Wenders have stepped in and spared him that final humiliation beyond the grave? Periodically during the film, Wenders does voice qualms about the ethics of the project, but these testaments to self-doubt scarcely absolve him of responsibility. *Lighting over Water's* supporting players—Wenders, his pals, and technicians—are last seen whooping it up at a post-mortem party on a sailboat in New York harbor. Inadvertently, this is the grisliest scene in the movie. Freed at last from their sycophantic rigors, these vultures can finally let go and savor the memory of their scavengings.

MY DINNER WITH ANDRE isn't really loathsome, merely anesthetizing. It's a self-penned valentine to the incessant quest for truth and fulfillment on the part of Andre Gregory and Wallace Shawn, two sacred calves in the Manhattan live-ly-arts corral. Among the aesthetically upwardly mobile, Shawn and Gregory are names to be conjured with, despite their fairly scanty resumé's. Gregory's principal repute rests on his experimental staging of *Alice in Wonderland* a decade ago; Shawn's stems from his authorship of two plays mounted at the Public Theater and La MaMa, his cameo as Diane Keaton's creepy first husband in *Manhattan*, and his personal literary pedigree as the son of *New Yorker* editor William Shawn. In between these displays of creativity, evidently, they've both been storing up deathless pensées on life, art, and their own relation to same.

We get to hear the lot, fashioned into a two-hour duologue over aperitifs and quail at a tony New York restaurant. Suave, sonorous-voiced Gregory is the more garrulous of the two; recently beset by a mid-life crisis, he offers up an awed

account of a mystical happening he organized with the Grotowski theatrical troupe in the woods outside Warsaw. After we've digested that, he's off musing about mankind's untapped primal instincts, his quest for spirituality, and the aridity of our contemporary cultural life (considering what we've been witnessing, I'll drink to that). One of this

zied protagonist, Hendrik Hofgen, from provincial matinee idol during the Weimar years to director of the Berlin State Theater under the Hitler regime. His greatest onstage triumph is as a prancing, sepulchral Mephistopheles, but behind the scenes, Hofgen has a far closer affinity with Faust. He's a chameleon who can adopt any ideological hue

Blier's film is a role-reversal Lolita yarn played for queasy comedy and slapstick pathos.

movie's main conceits is that you're never sure whether the Andre and Wally characters Malle records are fictional constructs or reflections of their real selves or something between the two—a moot point as far as I'm concerned. Like other self-absorbed intellectuals with time on their hands and anomie on the brain, the celluloid Andre tends to overdramatize his own dilemmas and then inflate them into monstrous generalizations on the human condition. When he intoned his claim that the alienation suffered by modern man could give the Holocaust a run for its money, I longed to track down Ray Bradbury and ask him to time-warp Gregory back for a weekend in Bergen-Belsen, to see how he liked it.

Perched restlessly on his chair like a bald chipmunk, Shawn occasionally interjects a note of Bohemian common sense during Gregory's rare pauses for reflection. Shawn's faith is rooted in the prosaic but tangible comforts of daily life—a cup of coffee, a danish, and an amorous fiancée. There's a dim flame of self-irony flickering somewhere in *My Dinner with Andre*, but it's extinguished by the complementary gusts of guff emanating from its author-interpreters. The fact that this movie has been so widely lauded as a work of audacity, wit, and revelation only indicates to me how terrified some people are to be caught with their philistine's trousers down in the presence of an Important Work.

The Hungarian-German *Mephisto* provided an inadvertent counterpoint to *My Dinner with Andre*—a portrait of a hubris-ridden theatrical artist whose tunnel-visioned ambition propels him into worldly success and private purgatory. Based on Klaus Mann's roman à clef about Nazi actor Gustav Grundgens, *Mephisto* traces the rise of its fren-

almost without thinking; any means can be rationalized if it cinches the adulation that nourishes him. Publicly nurtured yet subtly suffocated by the Nazi establishment, Hofgen's adherence to the egoist's creed inevitably steers him into the hollowest role of his career—the Fatherland's most prized cultural marionette.

The script, by Peter Dobai and director Istvan Szabo, occasionally strains to replicate the literary flourishes of its source, but in Hofgen the writers have crafted an absorbing figure divided against himself, more mercurial victim than willful malefactor. Klaus Maria Brandauer inhabits the role with unnerving intensity, mating the lithe magnetism of a born theatrical heartthrob with the glacial inward stare of a self-intoxicated obsessive. Szabo could have used some of that flamboyant moxie himself. As a director, he seems content to frame his star as artfully as possible, while doggedly covering the tracks left by the turns in the scenario. *Mephisto* doesn't evoke the milieu that exalts Hofgen with much precision or vigor; it's as though Szabo thought any period trappings would do, provided they were archaic and photogenic. It's tempting to speculate what the young Bertolucci or Visconti in his prime might have done with this material. As it is, *Mephisto's* panoramic ambitions are somewhat stunted by Szabo's well-meaning but circumscribed vision.

THE FILM FESTIVAL IS often accused of rampant Francophilia, and, as usual, entries from France dominated the selection this year. There were ten in all, if you included coproductions with Italy and Morocco and two shortish films by the U.S.-based expatriate, Agnes Varda.

The most striking thing about the more prominent Gallic films was the way time has tempered and, in some instances, reversed the priorities of France's former young generation of film makers. (Not, however, the eternally sophomoric Jacques Rivette, whose *Le Pont du Nord* is another of his Quaaludes-and-metaphors chases across Paris.) Directors like Truffaut and, somewhat later, Bertrand Blier first won attention with their freewheeling, elusive themes and characters, and the ragged vitality of their styles. However, both Blier's *Beau Père* and Truffaut's *La Femme d'à Côté* coolly navigate past the worn signposts left by earlier generations of mainstream film makers, keeping the machinery lubricated with a high-grade sheen of professionalism. Past Blier films such as *Get Out Your Handkerchiefs* and *Going Places* were often maddeningly oblique, with their eccentric notions of male bonding and inscrutable female insatiability. Blier seemed to be puzzling out his own feelings for these characters (never mind their motivations) as their stories passed before our eyes, and his own uncertainty was part of what made these films so provocative.

No such untoward jolts are in store from *Beau Père*, despite its mildly startling theme—every shift of emotion and plot has been calmly weighed and measured, then suspended in the aspic of Blier's artful camera compositions. This is a role-reversal Lolita yarn played for queasy comedy and slapstick pathos. An indolent jazz pianist (Patrick Dewaere) loses his lover in a freak car accident and resolves to raise her 15-year-old daughter (Ariel Besse), over the objections of the girl's dissolute absentee father (Maurice Ronet, bloated and rheumy eyed almost beyond the call of duty). The girl is delighted, because, as it turns out, her devotion for Dewaere goes considerably beyond the filial. Her passive, jittery foster parent holds out for as long as he can, vainly protesting that he's too young to be a dirty old man—but the girl's determination is implacable, and the sad-eyed Dewaere eventually succumbs.

Their liaison unfolds with the facile predictability of a boulevard farce, only played straight (more or less), and Blier's tone is imperturbably matter-of-fact throughout. (If anything, *Beau Père* turns into a wistful fantasy of a world in which all pubescent damsels have a yen for their elders, and conduct themselves accordingly. By the end, when Dewaere's new stepdaughter from his second marriage gets that telltale haze



Beau Père

in her eyes, you practically expect the soundtrack to break into a chorus of "Thank Heaven for Little Girls.") Dewaere is a touchingly flaccid figure who looks as though all the flesh in his face had been worn away by the combined toll of mourning, longing, and fatigue. Like most of Blier's past heroines, Ariel Besse masks unslakable, unfathomable instincts—all those hormones, no doubt—behind a tabula rasa face. *Beau Père* has a sensuously polished look, in a perplexingly old-fashioned mode; the Cinemascope lens glides fleetly past light-dappled interiors that reek of sound-stage fabrication, as anguished piano crescendos surge in the background, just like some Jane Wyman problem picture of the fifties. Maybe this was a strategy Blier employed to keep himself (and us) at a remove from a subject with which he all too clearly identifies. All of which tends to make patness out of perversity, even though this movie remains an arresting object for contemplation.

LIKE HIS ENORMOUSLY POPULAR *Le Dernier Metro*, Truffaut's *La Femme d'à Côté* seems designed from a blueprint for would-be masterpieces—you take a story quintessentially French in its details but universally applicable in its grand design, populate it with the most attractive vedettes at your disposal, lavish seamlessly-composed music and images on the lot, *et voilà!* *La Femme d'à Côté* has kilograms of class, but that isn't enough to make it a classic; it's too claustrophobically controlled for that, too avid to pass the twin goalposts of impressiveness and accessibility. Truffaut's premise is one of the most

primal of all celluloid formulas—an illicit affair that utterly consumes its protagonists, while scarring the hapless bystanders on the periphery. Gerard Depardieu plays a complacent married man living on the outskirts of Grenoble who is chagrined to discover that by a caprice of fate, the house next door has been let to a likewise wedded woman (Fanny Ardant) with whom he had had an explosive liaison some years before. A series of mutual feints and retreats leads inexorably to the resumption of their affair, and from there, of course, to Liebestod, all to the accompaniment of a turbulent, fate-ridden score by Georges Delerue, pleasantly reminiscent of Miklos Rosza in his *Spellbound* period.

Nearly every sequence has a Fabergé-egg patina of visual refinement and scrupulous care—perhaps not the most useful quality in a film purportedly about visceral passion and uncontrollable instincts. Truffaut's dexterity is undeniable, but the more resourceful he becomes, the greater is his penchant for calculated, choreographic set pieces—the desperate Depardieu grappling with the elusive Ardant, framed by the picture window of her living room in full view of her houseguests outside on the lawn. Completing the neat symmetry of the package is Truffaut's Greek chorus of one, who narrates the saga—a stoic, generous middle-aged woman (Veronique Silver) herself literally maimed by love in her youth. She's seen and been through it all, but like Piaf, she regrets nothing, and says so. The inclusion of this symbol of *sagesse* for dramatic counterpoint is the ultimate knowing touch in a film that hardly needed one. None

of this would have mattered if Truffaut had blessed his ill-starred lovers with some untoward traits or impulses, anything to give flesh to these archetypes. But the two are so emblematic they verge on abstraction; it's not desire that propels them to their doom so much as racial memory, passed down in the chromosomes inherited from decades of movie lovers consigned to oblivion for heeding their lusts instead of their consciences.

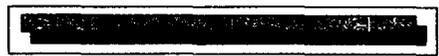
After the Truffaut and the Blier, maybe it shouldn't have been surprising that the French film with the most conspicuous signs of life was the most apparently artless of them all. Eric Rohmer's *La Femme de l'Aviateur* is a mere doodle next to such past achievements as *Ma Nuit chez Maud* and *Die Marquise von O*, but it shares with these his rare gift for capturing the essence of human contradiction; his people are constantly transforming themselves before our eyes, showing that the more we learn about each other, the deeper is the private reservoir that may never be fathomed by anyone else. *La Femme de l'Aviateur* is astonishingly simple in outline, and so unembellished visually that a lot of people will doubtless find it a trial to sit through. It's a kind of ciné-ma-vérité *La Ronde*, unfolding over a span of twenty-four hours. François, a whey-faced law student and postal clerk, is spurned by his moody fiancée Anne, who feels suffocated by his constant solicitude. He sets off across Paris to follow the tracks of Anne's ex-lover, the cause of much of her turbulence, and in the process encounters a captivating lycée student, Lucie, who playfully joins him in the chase. Back at his fiancée's cramped furnished room, François and Anne exchange high-pitched accusations and mumbled endearments, their relationship as unresolved as ever. On his way home he decides to pursue his acquaintance with the young girl he met that afternoon, and just before he reaches her doorstep, François sees Lucie giving a good-night embrace to none other than his pal at the post office.

All of which may be insignificant, but there's not a false or forced note in it. Not for the first time in his work, Rohmer's camera tends to settle down in a corner for a snooze while his characters pace and ponder and chat about apparent trivialities. Rohmer doesn't prod us to love or loathe or even understand his characters—he just freezes them in an affectionate but objective middle distance, allowing the audience to do some of the work for a change and

draw its own conclusions. And these are bound to be a little complicated; for all his peach-fuzz sweetness, the ardent hero is every bit as obtuse as Anne thinks he is, and her callousness is a blind for her own anguish. Lucie's most conspicuous quality is the amusement she gets from her own delightfulness. (If anybody has a right to be enchanted with herself, it's Anne-Laure Meury, who plays the part; she's wonderfully reminiscent of the vibrant *jeunes filles* Danielle Darrieux played in her saucy youth.) A movie whose characters reflect some of the resonance and imperfections of life shouldn't be such a rare phenomenon. But the way things are, under its gentle, inconsequential surface, Rohmer's movie seems positively to seethe with daring.

It took films by Poland's most celebrated film makers, Andrzej Wajda and Krzysztof Zanussi, and a scabrously funny movie about gay life in West Berlin to give the festival some momentum and excitement—more about them next time. □

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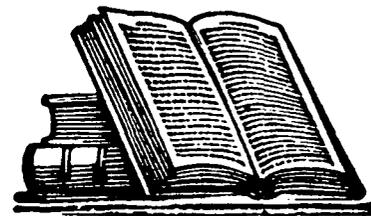
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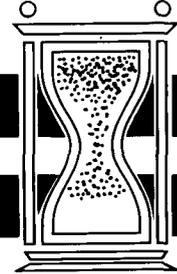
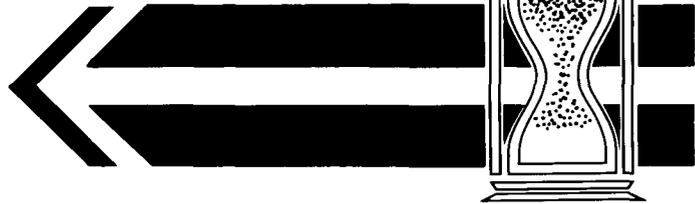
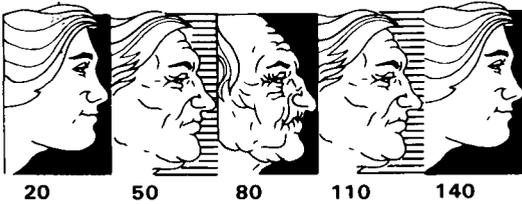
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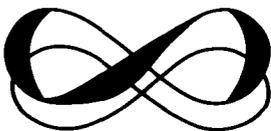
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