

Coming Oct. 28



Founders Present Cosby

The Founders Club of the Sisters of Mercy of Rochester will sponsor comedian Bill Cosby in two performances on Sunday, Oct. 28 at the Eastman Theatre. Sister Nancy Whitley, above, met with Cosby on May 19 at the Samuel L. Clemens Performing Arts Center in Elmira. Co-chairpersons for the October show are Sister Nancy and Gerard Guerinet, president of the Founders Club, a fund-raising group for the continuing education of Mercy Sisters.

BOOKS

Conspiracy Paranoia

Architects of Fear: Conspiracy Theories and Paranoia in American Politics, by George Johnson, Jeremy P. Tarcher (Los Angeles, 1983). 252 pp., \$13.95.

Reviewed by Brother Ronald D. Pasquariello, FMS
NC News Service

I always thought they were kooks, the people who phone into the local talk shows and babble on and on about the Trilateral Commission no matter what the topic of discussion might be, or those who pasted posters in downtown Washington, warning of a plot by an Antichrist to take over the world.

So in reading "Architects of Fear," I was stunned to find that among the believers in secret conspiracies to establish a one-world totalitarian government are the likes of Phyllis Schlafly, Ronald Reagan, George Washington, Samuel Morse, Henry Ford, and perhaps the Rev. Jerry Falwell, Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton.

To be sure, this is a loose confederation of people and they relate to the conspiracy theory in different ways.

But here is a common thread running through Western history, which author George Johnson correctly calls political paranoia. And it makes fascinating reading in a well-written book.

Johnson characterizes the myth that simmers at the bottom of the conspiracy theories the "Illuminati Legend."

Conspiracy theory adherents believe that there exists a cabal of highly intelligent people -- the Illuminati, in possession of extraordinary powers denied the common person and in possession of ancient secrets handed down over the generations, who are intent on putting the whole world under their totalitarian wing.

Among those persons or groups with extraordinary power are gnostics, Rosicrucians, Freemasons, the Communist International, the Trilateral Commission, Jews, Catholics, Jesuits, secular humanists, bankers and so on.

Not of a conspiratorial mindset, but an avid reader of spy novels, I enjoyed the book immensely, although I felt at the end of it that I had found out more about conspiracy theories than I'd ever wanted to know.

What I sorely missed was some analysis on the author's part of the reasons why the theories endure, and what impels people to find evidence of conspiracy in every dusty or dank corner of history.

Just what is it that drives an incumbent U.S. president, Reagan in 1981, to say about anti-American demonstrations in Europe: "Oh, those demonstrations. You could have used newsreels from the 1960s in America. Yes. Those are all sponsored by something called the World Peace Council, which is bought and paid for by the Soviet Union."

The author just reports the facts. The book would have benefited if he had dug deeper.

Brother Pasquariello is senior fellow at the Church Center for Teaching and Public Policy, Washington.

TELEVISION

Channel 21 To Broadcast Merton Biography in June

"Merton: A Film Biography of Thomas Merton," the first documentary ever produced on the contemporary spiritual figure, will premiere nationwide on the Public Broadcasting System this June.

Rochester's local PBS affiliate, WXXI-Channel 21, will air the one-hour special at 2 p.m. on both Wednesday, June 6, and Sunday, June 10.

A national presentation of WNET/New York, the program was made possible by grants from the Catholic Communication Campaign, the New York Council for the Humanities, and the Oblate (O.M.I.) Sharing Fund, among other donors.

During his 27 years as a Trappist monk, Thomas Merton became an eloquent spiritual writer and mystic as well as an outspoken social critic. His genius lay in his ability to communicate -- as a theologian, a concerned citizen and a friend.

In the course of his 53 years, Merton wrote some 60 books and hundreds of articles, essays and letters on a wide range of subjects.

The "Merton" project film crew traveled over 50,000 miles around the world to interview people who knew Merton, including the Dalai Lama; poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti; musician Joan Baez; Ernesto Cardenal, Nicaragua's minister of culture; Archbishops Jean Jadot and Rembert Weakland; Piffard Abbot John Eudes Bamberger; and the monks with whom he lived and shared parts of his life.

The interviews are blended with scenes of all the significant places in Merton's life -- his birthplace in Prades, France; Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky; Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka; and Bangkok, Thailand, where he died suddenly in 1968 while attending a conference for Eastern and Western monks.

Merton was a precocious child, the son of two artists. Orphaned at the age of 15, he is remembered by a school chum from Oakum in England as a "cheery fellow who thought deeply," but who was also "inclined to go off the rails and do mad things as well." By the time he entered Cambridge University, Merton was a restless adolescent developing tastes for smoking, drinking and the company of women.

As a result of his extra-curricular activities there, he was summoned to America where he continued his education at Columbia University. But a spiritual bent, which had emerged only intermittently in the past, began to take a strong hold.

At 27, Merton, whom his friends thought someday would be a well-known writer, did the absolutely unexpected -- he entered the Trappists at Gethsemani.

Seven years later, in 1948, Merton's first major book, "The Seven Storey Mountain," was published. This autobiography of his early life and conversion to Catholicism and his first years at Gethsemani became a phenomenal best-seller. To date it has sold over three million copies and has been translated into 15 languages.

Film Portrait a Success

By Henry Herx

The film portrait of Father Thomas Merton, produced by Paul Wilkes and Audrey Glynn, succeeds remarkably well in re-creating the life and multiple careers -- author, poet, social critic, contemplative, spiritual teacher -- of a complex personality who can be shown only through some still photographs, a short bit of 8mm film footage of his ordination and a film made of a 1968 lecture he gave at a Buddhist-Christian conference in Bangkok, Thailand, hours before his death.

Part of the reason it works so well is that much of it is told in Merton's own words as voiced with feeling by Gregory Abels. Wilkes' script compresses the richness of Father Merton's diverse talents and interests into a compact, well-organized narration delivered with his accustomed command by Alexander Scourby.

Also integral to the success of this film portrait is the testimony of those who knew Father Merton. Among the many interviewed for the program were the Dalai Lama, folksinger Joan Baez, publisher Robert Giroux, poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Sister of Loretto Mary Luke Tobin.

Of special interest for some is Father Merton's student, Father Ernesto Cardenal, now minister of culture in Nicaragua. He explains that Father Merton taught him "we couldn't consider ourselves as contemplatives unless we also committed ourselves to every aspect of the community -- its political, its social, its economic life."

Finally, mention must be made of the extraordinary skill of the camera work by Thomas Hurwitz. Its many beautiful images of nature provide passages of visual poetry and interior silences, entirely appropriate to the documentary's subject.

TV Programs of Note

Wednesday, June 6, 8-9 p.m. EDT (CBS) "The Lions of Etosha: King of the Beasts." Narrated by James Earl Jones, this documentary follows the adventures and family life of a single pride -- that is, group -- of lions over the course of five years. This close-up study is a remarkable achievement by wildlife filmmakers Des and Jen Barlett,



THOMAS MERTON

The subjects of his other books range from trenchant commentary on a variety of social issues to an interpretation of Zen Buddhism.

As his own thought and life progressed, he gave his readers a continuing appreciation of contemplation, meditation and the Christian religious quest. His critiques of national and international issues -- from the civil rights struggle to the war in Vietnam -- were so scathing that he was censured by his religious superiors and, for a time, was not allowed to publish.

Still, he communicated furiously -- with friends and strangers, the famous and the unknown, religious leaders of the East and the West, and the American government. In his years at Gethsemani, he corresponded with over 1,800 people, writing more than 21,000 letters.

In his later years, Merton's growing affinity for the East, which initially embarrassed some church officials, presaged closer ties and the interdisciplinary study so common today. During one interview in the documentary, the Dalai Lama described Merton as one of the rare Christians who "knew quite deeply about Buddhism."

Director, writer and co-producer Paul Wilkes was the associate producer, writer and host for the PBS series, "Six American Families," which won the distinguished duPont-Columbia award. He is the author of six books, including the soon-to-be-published "Merton: By Those Who Knew Him Best," a collection of the reflections of people interviewed for the film production.

The program is narrated by Alexander Scourby with Gregory Abels as the voice of Merton.

A promotional poster and viewer's guide for the Merton program are available from the Catholic Communication Campaign, Room 1300, 1011 First Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10022, (212/644-1895). A charge of \$1 covers the cost of postage and handling.

who won two Emmys for their 1973 documentary, "The Flight of the Snow Geese."

Sunday, June 3, 9-11 p.m. EDT (ABC) -- "Orca" (1977) -- Shark-hunter Richard Harris decides to go after bigger game and, in attempting to catch a male killer whale, kills its pregnant mate. Harris thus incurs the wrath of the male. Charlotte Rampling is on hand as a whale specialist who seems to have a soft spot in her heart for big brutes of all sorts. It is all very silly stuff and mediocre entertainment at best. There are some instances of rather graphic violence. The U.S. Catholic Conference classification is A-III -- adults; the Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG -- parental discretion.

Wednesday, June 6, 9-11 p.m. EDT (ABC) -- "Moment by Moment" (1978) -- A wealthy, middle-aged Beverly Hills housewife (Lily Tomlin), whose husband is having an affair with a young woman, succumbs to the charms of a young drifter (John Travolta) and helps him realize what is intended to be taken as his latent nobility and sensitivity. It is an altogether ludicrous and banal film, with hardly a glimmer of wit, intelligence or credibility. Despite some fumbling gestures on behalf of genuine human values, it is offensive in its graphic and glossy depiction of adultery. The USCC classification is O -- morally offensive; the MPAA rating is R -- restricted.

Thursday, June 7, 8-10 p.m. EDT (ABC) -- "Crossed Swords" (1978) -- Based on Mark Twain's "The Prince and the Pauper," this version emphasizes its potential for romance and spectacle, aided immensely by some stunning Tudor settings, gorgeous cinematography and rich, brilliant costuming. Mark Lester is very good in the dual role of the urchin who swaps places with the prince. Most notable among the cast are Oliver Reed as the nobleman who befriends the real prince, Rex Harrison as a humane but wily duke and George C. Scott as the leader of an outlaw band. This very entertaining film does, however, contain some graphic violence that may be inappropriate for younger children. The USCC classification is A-II -- adults and adolescents; the MPAA rating is PG -- parental discretion.