

MOVIES

Maybe It Was the Editing

Leone's 'America' Doesn't Measure Up

By Michael Gallagher

New York (NC) — Italian director Sergio Leone achieved fame with his spaghetti Westerns, which made a star out of Clint Eastwood.

His renown has always seemed more than a bit dubious to some since the Clintwood movies were inferior copies of the films of the great Akira Kurosawa, but nonetheless his high-budget American film "Once Upon a Time in the West" got a certain amount of critical acclaim.

Now with "Once Upon a Time in America" (Warners), Leone has attempted to make an American urban epic to stand beside his Western.

This melodramatic tale of Jewish gangsters, spanning 30 years, centers around the friendship of Noodles (Robert De Niro) and Max (James Woods) who start out as young punks and end up as middle-aged punks.

Rape and other forms of brutal violence figure

prominently in it, but there is nothing in the way of significant action.

Leone's epic is peopled by characters impossible to feel concerned about not only because their actions are so brutal but also because their motivations, other than the most elemental, remain a mystery whose key Leone and his battalion of scriptwriters never succeed in conveying to the viewer.

Why, I wonder, did Leone pick Jewish characters, for whom he obviously has no affinity, rather than Italian? And why compound the difficulty by selecting De Niro, who makes no attempt here to be anything in ethnic terms other than what he is?

Perhaps the movie was better in its original form, which at more than three hours was much better than this version shortened by more than an hour.

The dull and turgid nature of what remains, however, doesn't seem to indicate that an hour more of the same would have been an improvement.

All in all, this is a heavy-handed and repulsive film. Because of its violence and its crude and brutal depiction of sex, it has been classified O — morally offensive — by the U.S. Catholic Conference.

The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R — restricted.

TELEVISION

'Buddenbrooks' Should Be Entertaining All Summer

By Henry Herx

New York (NC) — "Buddenbrooks," Thomas Mann's 1901 novel about the struggles of a wealthy merchant family in 19th-century Germany, becomes a nine-part dramatization beginning Monday, June 18, 9-10:30 p.m. EDT on PBS, in Rochester, Channel 21.

The other programs in the series air on successive Mondays through Aug. 13.

Providing a basic introduction to the author and his place in 20th-century literature is veteran actor John Gielgud.

Less easy for Gielgud, however, is sketching in the complexities of the historical background against which the drama is set.

The action begins in 1835, a period some years before the Germans are united into the Empire of Germany under the rule of the Prussian Kaiser.

Already in the first episode, there are undercurrents of political and social unrest that will have a great effect on the fortunes of the Buddenbrooks.

Gielgud's introduction stresses the universal character of this family chronicle, likening it to "The Forsyte Saga," the first successful mini-series on PBS.

Subtitled his novel "The Decline of a Family," Mann constructed his story around four generations of a rich and powerful dynasty as the traditional values which nurtured their rise give way to the new age of materialism.

The story begins with the Buddenbrooks as one of the leading families of Lubeck, the North German seaport and trading center.

The grandfather has built the family firm into a very profitable business. His son, prudent but unimaginative, is unable to further the firm's growth because of a period of economic stagnation and is concerned about safeguarding the family fortune.

When a business associate from Hamburg asks for his daughter's hand, he sees this as insurance against possible future financial reverses.

His daughter, however, finds the man from Hamburg an insufferable bore and refuses to consider his suit.

With her father's lectures about her "duty" to the family ringing in her ears, she is packed off to the seashore to come to her senses.

There she falls in love with a penniless medical student and writes her father that she intends to marry him. Her hopes are crushed when she is forced to return home to face a loveless marriage.

After an opening scene of the Buddenbrooks hosting a party for the notable citizens of Lubeck, there is a long section of genealogical detail being entered into the family journal.

This slow start is redeemed when the narrative turns its attention to the daughter's doomed attempt at rebellion.

This 1978 German co-production with French and Polish television is done on a lavish scale with many splendid period buildings, elegant interiors and lovely landscapes. The photography bathes all in lush colors and night scenes are illuminated in the golden glow of candlelight. It is a beautiful visualization of a past age of elegance and manners.

The dramatization is, of course, dubbed into English but this should prove no handicap for viewers willing to accept an occasional lapse of synchronization between lips and voice.

Unlike a number of previous foreign-language series on PBS, "Buddenbrooks" gives promise, both in content and production quality, that it will make worthwhile watching over the summer months.

Ratings

These are the USCC symbols and their meanings: A-I — general patronage; A-II — adults and adolescents; A-III — adults; A-IV — adults, with reservations (an A-IV classification designates certain films that, while not morally offensive in themselves, require caution and some analysis and explanation as a protection to the uninformed against wrong interpretations and false conclusions); O — morally offensive. The word "recommended" appears behind the titles of those films that merit such a designation.

Blame It On Rio, O (R)
The Bounty, A-IV (PG)
Breakin', A-II (PG)
Broadway Danny Rose, A-III (PG)
Buddy System, A-III (PG)

Finders Keepers, O (R)
Firestarter, A-III (R)
Footloose, A-III (PG)

Greystoke: The Legend of Tarzan, A-III (PG)

Hardbodies, O (R)
Hard to Hold, A-III (PG)
Harry and Son, O (PG)

Ice Man, A-II (PG)
Ice Pirates, A-III (PG)
Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom, A-III (PG)

Lassiter, O (R)
The Lonely Guy, A-III (PG)

Making the Grade, O (R)
Misunderstood, A-II (PG)
Moscow On the Hudson, O (R)

The Natural, A-II (PG)

Police Academy, O (R)
Privates On Parade, A-III (R)
The Prodigal, A-II (PG)
Purple Hearts, A-III (R)

Racing With the Moon, O (PG)
The Right Stuff, A-III (PG)
Romancing the Stone, A-III (PG)

Scarface, O (R)
Sixteen Candles, O (PG)
Splash, A-III (PG)

The Stone Boy, A-II (PG) (Recommended)
Stuck On You, O (R)
Swing Shift, A-III (PG)

Tender Mercies, A-II (PG) (Recommended)
Terms of Endearment, A-III (PG)

Capsule Movie Reviews

'Star Trek III: The Search for Spock' (Paramount)

This third adventure of the old Enterprise gang is considerably better than its two predecessors. Directed by Leonard Nimoy and written by Harve Bennett, it involves the efforts of Adm. James Kirk (William Shatner) and his crew to return to the planet Genesis, resting place of Capt. Spock (Leonard Nimoy), who gave his life to save the spaceship in the last outing on the chance that he might somehow be restored to life. Their own military bureaucracy and some heavy-breathing Klingon pirates (Christopher Lloyd shines as a villain among all these good guys) stand in their way. But, old pros that they are, they surmount all obstacles on the way to a grand and solemn climax on Spock's home planet Vulcan — presided over by no less a person than Judith Anderson herself, who seems to have lost none of the authority she brought to Medea long, long ago. Non-"Trekkies" weaned on the razzle-dazzle and comic book humor of "Star Wars" might find things a bit too serious and slow going, but "Star Trek III" proves that it is possible to be both entertaining and civilized, however rare an accomplishment that is these days. The USCC classification is A-II — adults and adolescents. The industry rating is PG — parental guidance suggested.

'Streets of Fire' (Universal)

Described as a "rock and roll fable," this is a listless and boring effort without one shred of credibility. Written and directed by Walter Hill, who specializes in tedious, stylized celebrations of the macho mystique, it's all about a brooding outsider of a hero (Michael Pare) who rescues a rock star (Diane Lane, a talented actress utterly lost here as well she might be) from a gang of bikers with the help of a straight-shooting female sidekick (Amy Madigan, another talented actress wasted). Because of a homosexual dance sequence and the film's violence — which like everything else in it is quite unreal — it has been classified A-III — adults by the USCC. The industry rating is PG — parental guidance suggested.

BOOKS

'Miracles' and Life in the Soviet Union Explored

"Miracles," by Marcy Heidish. New American Library (New York, 1984). 312 pp., \$15.50.

Reviewed by Father Charles Dollen
NC News Service

Canonization is usually a long and tedious process, even when it deals in miracles.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of it is the role played by the "devil's advocate," the priest who has to contest the process.

Marcy Heidish has written a fascinating novel about the life of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton as viewed by an American priest who has been designated the devil's advocate in investigating a miracle attributed to Mother Seton.

Father Thomas Dreux Chandler is a complex man who is having vocational problems. He brings an added measure of cynicism to his work on this case since he would rather not believe in the miracle.

With this as the setting, the novel goes on to review the life of Mother Seton in all its varying aspects. She was as native an American as a white woman can be, having been born in 1774. She was a teen-ager when George Washington was introduced to New York society as "Mr. President." She grew up with the Republic.

Her early life is the material for story-books, or even soap operas. The youthful romance, marriage and happy family life are rosy indeed.

Then tragedy struck her life, and she returned from a trip to Italy a widow and a convert to Catholicism. Her vocation as a Religious came out of the blue, but she worked at it heroically.

That's the story that comes through in "Miracles," even through the jaundiced eyes of Father Chandler. What it does to him makes an interesting follow-up to the whole story.

The book can be highly recommended for parish libraries and for summertime leisure reading.

Father Dollen is book review editor for The Priest magazine.

"Life in Russia," by Michael Binyon. Pantheon (New York, 1983). 286 pp., \$15.95.

"Women and Russia: Feminist Writings from the Soviet Union," edited by Tatyana Mamonova. Beacon Press (Boston, 1984). 273 pp., \$9.95 (paper).

Reviewed by Father Denis Dirscherl

These two new books about Russia are both informative and up-to-date. Each complements the other.

The first, by former London Times Moscow correspondent Michael Binyon, is a popularly written view of the Soviet scene.

The second offering was written by a handful of women in the Soviet Union,

each with a decidedly different philosophy about the needs and aspirations of what must be called the "stronger sex" in today's Soviet life.

Binyon's book deals with familiar topics: youth, women, leisure, religion, crime, the arts and others. He provides a fresh and reflective account of his experiences while living and traveling in the Soviet Union.

Here is a taste of his many conclusions about life in Russia:

• "No Westerner is ever permitted to learn more than a fraction of what goes on in such an obsessively secretive society."

• "The great threat to the leadership and to the Soviet system in general comes not from new NATO missiles, but from the all pervasive influence of the West...."

• "The Soviet Union is a world of its own. But it is a world its rulers ever fear will fly apart into disparate fragments unless they keep a very tight grip."

The second book, edited by exile Tatyana Mamonova in France, is definitely a sleeper. Her book will probably make more sense to a reader who has perused Binyon's book first. The book is not a propaganda feast, but rather a carefully selected rendition of many deep feelings of women in the Soviet Union, emphasizing their unfulfilled needs and the problems that arise from these needs.

The writers are well educated, informed and clever. Their ideas will not be accepted by all, but they have some very trenchant

views about what the woman must put up with in everyday life in Russia.

The truth is that women of the Soviet Union have many more obligations and responsibilities than men. In fact, the authors point out, they are doubly exploited, at work and at home. Yet, they are the backbone of the empire; they keep it together.

The writers make the point that the Soviet Constitution is a very beautiful document, but it does not translate into real life. What it does is to give women the right to perform "heavy dirty labor." One points out, "In Leningrad 90 percent of the janitors are women."

The incisiveness that marks the book is very evident in a thought-provoking commentary on Soviet unity. "For Soviet people," it says, "this forced, unnatural unity is easily capable of becoming a natural, reasonable, and even voluntary unity as soon as they can be convinced of a danger threatening them from without, of the outside world's basic hostility to them. With the help of this clever propaganda trick, the Soviet people feel united as troops guarding the fortress instead of feeling united as prisoners."

Father Dirscherl, a Jesuit and an Air Force chaplain, studied Russian at the Army Language School, attended the Institute of Russian Studies of Fordham University, and studied at the Russian School of Middlebury College in Vermont.