

CINEMA:

Before the Deluge

By John Broeck

The good old holiday crunch is upon us now bringing with it many paranoid hours of frenzied shopping plus monetary paranoia for film producers who have saved all their "biggies" for the end of the year to qualify, of course, for Academy Award nominations. Before the New Year, an avalanche of possible winners, all anticipated hits, will be released. And what a collection! Maggie Smith in Graham Greene's *TRAVELS WITH MY AUNT*, Lord Laurence Olivier and Michael Caine in *SLEUTH*, O'Toole and Loren in *MAN OF LA MANCHA*, James Mason and Robert Preston in *CHILD'S PLAY*, Joanne Woodward (with Paul Newman directing) in *MARIGOLDS*, Robert Redford in *JEREMIAH JOHNSON*, and Paul Newman with Ava Gardner in *THE LIFE AND TIMES OF JUDGE ROY BEAN*. There's also Barbra Streisand in *UP THE SANDBOX*, and Steve McQueen with Ali McGraw in *THE GETAWAY*. In the meantime, there are some old goodies and some new baddies.

Jack L. Warner's production (reduction is more apt) of 1776 (coupled with one of the shoddiest and shortest stage shows in Radio City Music Hall history) is the type of film that will offend anyone over the age of ten. It is simplistic, innocuous, and often charming in a workmanlike way, which means to say that it may be entertaining but that it is not art.

First of all, 1776 is not a real musical but rather a play with several tepid songs thrown in to make the proceedings palatable. The songs (can't they get singers for film musicals anymore?) are given the worst possible delivery and motivations as to make them totally implausible. The idea of our founding fathers singing up a political storm in sweltering Philadelphia is far-fetched at best, but the drive they have been given to sing compounds the problem and makes the film totally unbelievable.

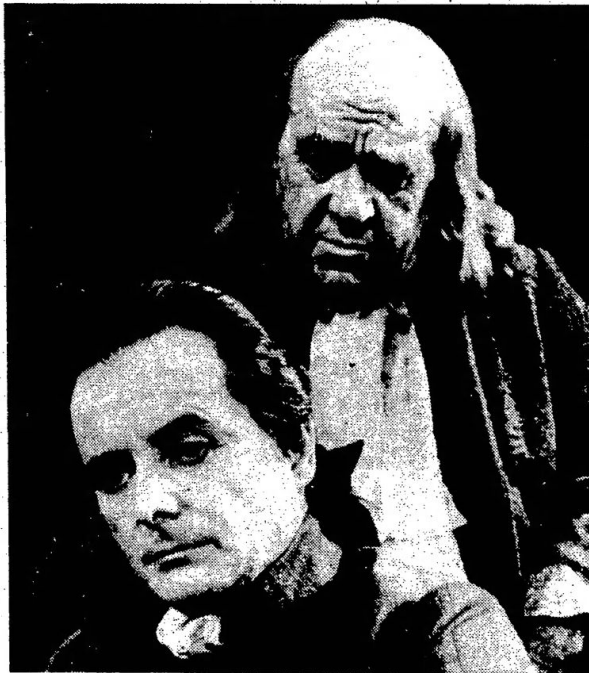
The next big bone of contention was the hiring of virtually the same creative (sic) and acting staff associated with the Broadway version. Acting-wise, the film has a few moments. But on the creative level, there has been no creation worth mentioning. Everyone settles for what they have done before, and made it worse, to boot. Peter Hunt's amateurishly inept direction (he doesn't even know how to properly frame a scene) is matched by Onna White's lame choreography. Peter Stone's screenplay borders on idiocy with its historical clichés and anachronistic, political bon mots. Even Harry Stradling's photography is lackluster and uninteresting.

Of the cast, Howard DaSilva is ingratiating as Ben Franklin, with his teddy bear smile and purring voice. William Daniels, as John Adams, plays the same facial expressions (scowl and sneer) throughout; while Ken Howard is a stiff and awkward Thomas Jefferson. Stone's screenplay lets them be nothing more than empty stereotypes.

Typical of the film's excesses is a scene where Blythe Danner as Martha Jefferson sings a romantic little ditty called "He Plays His Violin," a sniggering, sexually oppressive song making Martha into a simpering little housefrau. You see, Tom can't write the Declaration because he's hot and horny. So, off he goes to the little old wife, off comes the passion and frustration, and then her song, and then the Declaration itself. It's bad enough that the women behind the men are given such short shrift; but to compound the error by making them into sexual objects is unnecessarily vulgar.

For two and a half hours, 1776 manages to keep afloat. It is entertaining in a mindless sort of way, just the type of film that appeals (and I really don't mean to be snobbish) to most people. But if there is any film that can hasten the demise of Radio City Music Hall, this is it.

Speaking of women as sexual objects comes quite easily to Len Cantrow, the leading character, in *THE HEART-*



Howard DaSilva (above) and William Daniels as our fumbling fathers in the film version of the hit, Broadway musical 1776.

BREAK KID (opening December 17 at the Sutton Theatre). What is least expected is that Elaine May as director could have made such an unredeeming, chauvinistic comedy.

Despite this one nagging aspect, the film has many joys, writing, acting, and directing-wise. Neil Simon's script, based on a short story by Bruce Jay Friedman, concerns a young man who gets married, falls in love with another girl on the honeymoon, gets unmarried, and then marries the new girl. Such ingredients don't seem to be the staple of comedy, but then Neil Simon's serious side comes through to give us a flippant tragicomedy. None of his usual fast punch lines and the like in this script. Although there is a question as to whether Simon in Ms. May's hands comes off more seriously than Simon in Mike Nichols's hands. To really judge her contribution all you have to do is to compare her direction in this film to Arthur Hiller's direction of Simon's "The Out-of-Towners." The obvious comparison is that Elaine May can take a basically serious situation and make it hysterically funny without losing the serious tone, while Hiller tends to eight gags and superficial farce.

One big problem, the chauvinistic angle, is that the main focus of the film is with Lenny and is told from his viewpoint. Lenny does or doesn't want the women, but how the women really feel towards him is never expressed. Lenny's first wife, Lila (played by Ms. May's daughter, Jeanne Berlin, who resembles a bumbling Anne Bancroft) is a klutz, the type of Jewish girl you could learn to easily hate. Kelly, the girl Lenny meets on his honeymoon (as played and truly personified by model-turned-actress Cybill Shepherd) is a beautiful sex object, the prom queen, the all American girl. Simon never completes these characterizations or presents other facets to their characters. Ms. May never rounds them out either, which is most surprising.

Lenny is basically a heel, a man who doesn't know exactly who or what he wants out of life. He tends to settle for things until something better comes along. The fact that Charles Grodin can take this unappealing character and make him heart-warming is no mean feat.

So what you as the audience is left with is a film that makes you chuckle inwardly, with a few belly laughs, a film comedy that is more cerebral than jovial. *THE*

HEARTBREAK KID is a definite plus in Elaine May's career, but somehow it is just not as funny as a comedy should be.

For the truly cerebral, cerebral is that you think with your heart, there is Robert Bresson's *FOUR NIGHTS OF A DREAMER* (at the Art Theatre in Greenwich Village), a stunningly simple film about a young man winning and losing in love.

Bresson, a true auteur, has changed his style somewhat with this film, losing his static quality, losing the idea that his actors must be puppets on a string. Bresson usually forces his actors to underplay to such an extent that they often become unmoving screen zombies, creating characters seemingly disconnected from their environment. *DREAMER* moves forward in that the characters are quite lifelike and real and empathetic. They seem to understand what is happening to them. In this case, the story probably dictated the stylistic change.

The plot concerns a young artist who saves a girl from drowning herself

because she is despondent over a dying love affair. For four nights they meet on a bridge over the Seine and relate the own private histories, fall in love, and then fall out of love. This plot has defeated many directors on past occasions; but Bresson, being a master of small detail and insight, delicately balances the material and makes it fresh and interesting.

As an ode to love, and the film is highly romantic, it succeeds on many levels without being coy and trite. It's as if an older man was fondly remembering his first love affair and how he matured because of it. In simplicity, Bresson seems complex. In the ordinary, he finds the single thread that makes it beautiful. *FOUR NIGHTS OF A DREAMER* is the perfect film to move you to a recognition of yourself and your own humble shortcomings.

The best dramatic film now playing in New York, is *BABY DOLL* (at the Baronet Theatre). First released in 1956, and then obliterated by the Catholic Church for its supposed carnal excesses, *BABY DOLL* is one of Elia Kazan's finest films, a minor masterpiece.

With an original script from Tennessee Williams, the film focuses on a middle-aged cotton processor (Karl Malden) who has married the young local beauty (Carroll Baker). In order to keep her in the style to which she is accustomed, as all southern belles were kept, he has had to hock his belongings and buy a rundown old mansion which he is renovating. The curious angle is that the marriage cannot be consummated until her twenty-first birthday (here's where the Church got a little paranoid).

A new syndicate, led by Eli Wallach, has taken over most of the local cotton business, leaving Malden almost destitute. In an attempt to regain business, he sets fire to Wallach's plant. Wallach seeks revenge and goes after Baby Doll to get her to sign a statement that Malden started the fire.

Most of the plot details are a might too complex to go into here, thanks to Mr. Williams' baroque mind and native ability at portraying the South at its lowest ebb. But with Kazan in tow, *BABY DOLL* becomes a powerhouse of thwarted emotions, ambition, retribution, and the like. Kazan's direction is a perfect example of how to keep a three character story from becoming static or boring.

Having never seen the film until recently, the idea of why the Church so vigorously sabotaged this film makes little sense. Its dramatic and human values far surpass any of the small sexual angles in the film. There is so little sex, in fact, that if the film were released today, it would probably be rated "G".

What is most astonishing about the film besides the beautiful performances from Karl Malden and Eli Wallach is the sensitive and intuitive acting of Ms. Baker. Her acting is so brilliant that it really makes you want to cry when you see what trash she has been forced to do since then.



Isabel Weingarten and Guillaume des Forets as the young lovers in Robert Bresson's *FOUR NIGHTS OF A DREAMER*.