

Arts & Letters

FILM

[*La Vie en Rose*]

Edith Piaf: The Struggles of the Sparrow

By Steve Sailer

WHY IS THE “struggle with inner demons” such a staple of movies about musicians and actors?

Part of the reason is selection bias: producers aren't dying to make “The Johann Sebastian Bach Story” because composing a new masterpiece for Sunday church services each week while fathering 20 children didn't leave Bach much time for self-inflicted drama.

Nonetheless, on average, performers really do live more chaotic lives than the rest of us. The detective novelist and screenwriter Raymond Chandler explained in *The Little Sister*, his novel about a troubled actress, “If these people didn't live intense and rather disordered lives, if their emotions didn't ride them too hard—well, they wouldn't be able to catch those emotions in flight and imprint them on a few feet of celluloid ...”

Nobody lived a more intense and disordered life than Edith Piaf (1915-63), the Parisian chanteuse depicted in the melodramatic and moving French film “*La Vie en Rose*.” While her contemporary Judy Garland became an icon to male homosexuals (the gay liberation movement began in 1969 when drag queens returning from Garland's funeral

rioted at New York's Stonewall bar), Piaf was a national heroine, as French as Johnny Cash was American.

Although many showbiz biopics punch up the drama with fiction, writer-director Olivier Dahan's big problem was what to leave out to keep “*La Vie en Rose*” down to 140 minutes. Amusingly, he omitted World War II, which Piaf spent in German-occupied Paris. (The embarrassing reality is that while Piaf did help the Resistance, her career, like many French culturati's, flourished during the Occupation, which was easier in Paris than elsewhere—the more civilized and Francophilic German officers tried to wangle assignments there.)

Many pop stars concoct hardscrabble mythologies to blur their privileged upbringings. For instance, the lead singer of the great leftist punk rock band The Clash gave himself the macho prole name Joe Strummer to obscure that he was the son of a diplomat. Piaf's childhood, however, was the real thing.

Abandoned as an infant by her mother, a street singer and prostitute, Piaf was dumped by her father, a circus contortionist, with his madam mother to grow up in a bordello. When the little girl went blind from conjunctivitis, the whores with hearts of gold chipped in to send her on a pilgrimage to Lisieux to pray at the grave of St. Thérèse. Her sight restored, she began singing in her father's street-corner act.

Dahan chopped up the storyline of “*La Vie en Rose*” chronologically, perhaps because Piaf's life was such a string of catastrophes that a straightforward retelling would have left punch-drunk audiences giggling at the one-damn-thing-after-anotherness of it all.

At 18, she had an illegitimate child, who soon died, and she fell under the thumb of a pimp. Piaf was discovered

singing on the street at age 20 by a nightclub owner (played by the formidable Gerard Depardieu), but he was murdered and the police at first accused her. The great love of her life, middleweight world champion boxer Marcel Cerdan, died in a plane crash on his way to a rendezvous with her in New York. A painful car crash turned her into a morphine junkie, and cancer killed her at 47, before which she looked to be 80.

Perhaps due to childhood malnutrition, she only grew up to be 4'8". (Despite being over ten inches taller, Marion Cotillard somehow portrays Piaf with spectacular verisimilitude.) Like Dick Cheney, her head inclined to the right. Out of this sparrow-like frame emerged an enormous voice, magnificent and nasally piercing, perfect for belting out “*Le Marseillaise*.”

In these days of easy electronic amplification, it seems strange that for centuries the great challenge to professional musicians was to generate enough sternum-vibrating volume to blast the full emotional and physical power of the music out to a large paying audience.

By the time of Piaf's discovery in 1935, Bing Crosby had revolutionized singing by introducing a quieter, more conversational style suited to the microphone, but she mostly stood by the old loud mode. At her peak in the 1950s (despite all her woes, she continued to improve as an interpreter of songs), she could sound lovely, but the film chooses to emphasize her more stentorian style. To 21st-century audiences, Piaf might sound like a curiosity, a pocket-battleship Ethel Merman. Still, “*La Vie en Rose*” is one of the best musical biopics. ■

Rated PG-13 for substance abuse, sexual content, brief nudity, language, and thematic elements.

BOOKS

[George Kennan: A Study of Character, John Lukacs, Yale University Press, 207 pages]

An American For All Seasons

By Daniel McCarthy

GEORGE F. KENNAN (1904-2005) was and remains best known for the doctrine of containment. He was the man of the hour in 1947, when *Foreign Affairs* published “The Sources of Soviet Conduct” under the byline “X.” His authorship of the essay, which heralded a sea change in America’s posture toward the Soviet Union, didn’t remain secret for long. He had become, in what is now his almost inescapable epithet, “the architect of the Cold War.” Four years later, Truman crowned Kennan’s career by naming him ambassador to the USSR.

Well before this, Kennan had a distinguished record in the Foreign Service: he had been part of the first staff at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow in the ’30s and served as deputy head of mission there from 1944-46. In the interim, he had been assigned to the U.S. Embassy in Berlin, where he was interned for six months after Germany declared war on the United States; in that crisis, he became *de facto* leader of the detained American diplomats. His “Long Telegram” from Moscow in 1946, which became the basis for “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” laid the cornerstone for America’s Cold War strategy. After his return to the States in 1947, he became head of the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff, with a hand in (among other things) the crafting the Marshall Plan. All this, and still more than half his life lay ahead of him.

In the 42 years between his last diplomatic post, as ambassador to Yugoslavia from 1961-63, and his death, Kennan

traveled, lectured, studied, and wrote—he wrote millions of words, in fact, for the public, for friends, and for himself: essays, books, letters, diaries. And his output had been hardly less prodigious during his years of government service. So copious are his literary remains, warns John Lukacs, that any future biographer will be overwhelmed. In his *Study of Character*, Lukacs himself has not attempted to give us a complete lexicon of Kennan’s life; instead he has provided in this short book a Rosetta Stone with which to decipher the true character of the man and his thought amid the litter of slogans and hype that muddies public discourse.

We can’t fail to have a better understanding of Kennan’s thinking in years to come—if only because he is so widely misunderstood today. Containment, for example, was never meant to be a military doctrine, still less a game of nuclear brinksmanship. “This readiness to use nuclear arms,” he wrote with uncharacteristic vehemence in “A Christian’s View of the Arms Race,” “is nothing less than a presumption, a blasphemy, an indignity—an indignity of monstrous dimensions—offered to God!” Nor was Kennan himself a right-wing Cold Warrior turned lefty peacenik. He recognized the distinct evils of communism and Russian nationalism from the beginning. But he didn’t let those evils blind him to the danger of overreaction at home: “I tremble when I see this attempt to make a semi-religious cult out of emotional-political currents of the moment,” he said of anticommunism in an address at the University of Notre Dame in 1953.

That appeal to reason at the height of the McCarthy era was, in Lukacs’s estimation, one of Kennan’s greatest moments; indeed, Lukacs reprints the entirety of that speech as an appendix to this book. Like Kennan, Lukacs was an anti-anticommunist yet not at all a man of the Left. A Hungarian refugee from communism, Lukacs has nonetheless always lambasted the nationalist fevers of the American Right. He is an able and sympathetic expositor of Kennan, a

friend with whom he corresponded for some 50 years. (A decade ago, Lukacs published a collection of their letters dealing with the dawn of the Cold War as *George F. Kennan and the Origins of Containment 1944-1946: The Kennan-Lukacs Correspondence*.)

Their few points of disagreement should sharpen readers’ appreciation of both men’s thoughts: Lukacs agrees with Kennan that Truman’s hardened stance against the Soviet Union was, if anything, late rather than premature, but nonetheless believes that the U.S. had to make a close ally of Stalin during World War II. Kennan, by contrast, held that the U.S. was right to help the USSR against Germany militarily, but should not have extended anything like moral friendship. (What’s the difference? Think of T.S. Eliot, no leftist, scotching the British publication of George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* by Faber and Faber in 1944 lest Uncle Joe take offense—not that Lukacs would have behaved so shabbily.) And Kennan, unlike Lukacs, would not have advised the U.S. to get involved in the European war before Germany declared war on it, though he later acknowledged that the Holocaust would have been reason enough to intervene. Kennan’s example belies the impression to which Lukacs’s writing sometimes gives rise—that all opponents of the war were strident Anglophobic nationalists who afterwards became staunch anticommunists.

Lukacs sketches his subject’s life and career succinctly and effectively; his book serves as a marvelous introduction to Kennan. But that is not its objective: this volume really is a study in character, “and by ‘character,’” writes Lukacs, “I mean [Kennan’s] *conscious* decisions, choices, acts and words, but nothing of his—so-called—subconscious; that is, no attributions of psychoanalytic categories, no ham-handed projections or propositions of secret or hidden motives.” The author wants to communicate as much as possible the demonstrated essence of this man who, he writes, “not only represented but incarnated some of the best and finest traits of American character”