

# The Flowers (and Weeds) of Spring

**L**et others look for larks and daffodils. After a winter of serious fare and pseudo-innovations, a cineaste's spring is heralded by a variety of pleasing entertainments.

Above all, there's Blake Edwards's **Victor/Victoria**, a serious consideration of role-playing decked out as a lavish, luscious, ribald musical comedy that will leave you laughing with just a bit of a lump in your throat and a thought or two in your head. Its source is a 1933 German film, *Viktor und Viktoria*, conceived by Hans Hoernburg and written and directed by Reinhold Schuenzel. And small doubt that the international success of *Cage aux Folles* indicated that the time was right for a consideration of sexual identities and propensities. But Edwards has established himself over the past 20 years as a master of both craft and comedy (with the *Pink Panther* series, *10*, and *S.O.B.* as evidence), and anyone familiar with his work can presume that the writer-director-producer has made the material entirely his own.

*Victor/Victoria* is set in Paris in 1934, with Julie Andrews a stranded coloratura on her uppers, ready to sell herself for a strand of spaghetti, let alone a meatball. She encounters Robert Preston, as an over-the-hill homosexual entertainer who has just lost his job. He gives her shelter and his ex-lover's clothes—and therein is the inspiration. Why not a nightclub act with Andrews in drag, offering her as a young Polish count who sings and dances as a woman and then reveals herself as a man (concealing the fact that she really is a woman)?

Victoria becomes Victor everywhere but in the privacy of the room and bed that Andrews and Preston share companionably, and Victor becomes the toast of Paris. And one night into the club comes James Garner, king of the Chicago rackets, with his tootsie and his bodyguard in tow. Garner is smitten by the woman on stage, much to the tootsie's chagrin, and he's still smitten, albeit horrified, when she ends the act as a man,

much to the tootsie's grim satisfaction.

All of this is for starters, with Edwards weaving a plot of marvelous complexity, what with the tootsie, banished back to Chicago, reporting to Garner's partner that his associate is "shackin' up with a Polish fairy"; Preston's ex-boss hiring a private eye to confirm his suspicions about the act; and Garner's bodyguard making revelations of his own. As is his wont, Edwards stints on neither pratfall,



James Garner (front), Robert Preston, and Julie Andrews in *Victor/Victoria*.

double-take, nor double entendre, filling his screen with odd minor characters and lush production numbers built around a dandy Henry Mancini score, ultra-bright Leslie Bricusse lyrics, and costumes to knock your eye out. Edwards keeps the action going at a breakneck pace, with time out for riots and mayhem.

But the heart of the matter is each character's sudden awareness of role playing and consideration of self. For Andrews, as a woman playing a man who is playing a woman, there is a duality of love—for Preston as friend, for

Garner as male—and a devotion to being Victor, which makes her feel "emancipated—I'm my own man." For Garner, there is the shock of attraction to a man, then the peculiarity of a woman's penchant for playing a man, a consideration of macho, and even a questioning of his own pretense at being a "businessman" rather than a gangster. His bodyguard (Alex Karras, at a comic high) and tootsie (Leslie Ann Warren, who has come into her own as a comedienne) also face personal probings.

Above all, as auteur, Edwards constantly expands the talents of his company, providing larger arenas for his current stars. Julie Andrews is simply brilliant: All the gifts that sparkled in her Broadway and film musicals glitter in her maturity; she is pure enchantment as performer and as actress. Preston, brought back to film in *S.O.B.* with his unforgettable portrayal of a Doctor Feelgood, is beautifully disciplined, subtle in every move and gesture, emerging finally—and unexpectedly—as the one person on hand at peace with himself, aware of who and what he is. His is a noteworthy portrait, compassionate and tender. Garner too is restrained, his television slickery giving way to a rough-hewn and appealing portrait of the male discomfited, needing the solace of a brawl to clear his sinuses. Warren and Karras are picture-stealers, while Graham Stark, as a waiter who's employed everywhere, and Sherloque (sic!) Tannev, as the private eye, grab their scenes and run. In all, it's a splendid entertainment for grownups, who do or don't know who they are.

**I**s it giving anything away to note that homosexuality is also a factor in **Deathtrap**? The newest Jay Presson Allen-Sidney Lumet collaboration is based on the thriller by Ira Levin that has been on Broadway since February 26, 1978. To say very much of anything about this suspense-comedy is, I fear, to spoil it for anyone unfamiliar with its

UNITED ARTISTS

twist-and-turn plot; even those who have seen the play have surprises in store.

The screen adaptation by Allen has not "opened" the drama significantly beyond its initial sequences. We're still down to the lonely-country-house setting with wild rainstorms, power failures, and the question of not only who is who but also of who is going to do what to whom. It's the casting that provides the main pleasures of this version. Michael



Michael Caine stalks in *Deathtrap*.

Caine plays the established writer of mystery dramas who hasn't had a hit in too long: Christopher Reeve is the aspiring playwright who may just have a hit in hand (or manuscript), and the two of them are first-class antagonists in the killer-cat-and-murderous-mouse duel that ensues. Allen has enhanced the role of the playwright's wife, as does Dyan Cannon in playing it; Irene Worth has herself a ball as the Dutch seeress next door; and Henry Jones is the ultimate in untrustworthy lawyers.

One has the feeling that Lumet and Allen undertook this project as relaxation after their *Prince of the City*—and it is just that. Beyond the plot, the major satisfaction is in seeing Reeve leave Clark Kent and Superman far behind and give us a multifaceted and freshly fascinating character. He, Caine, and Lumet keep our eyes on the action and make it easy to avoid the plot holes.

The plot's the thing for Agatha Christie buffs, and *Evil Under the Sun*, from the producers who also gave us her *Murder on the Orient Express*, *Death on the Nile*, and *The Mirror Crack'd*, is strictly for the Christie crowd. With a script by Anthony Shaffer, of *Sleuth* fame, directed by Guy Hamilton, elegantly filmed in Majorca, it offers a wallow for Dame

Agatha's fans. The movie is rich in characters, luxurious in sets and 1933 idlerich costumes, complicated in set-up, and overflowing with the reenactment of alibis in the traditional time-for-solution finale, all to the tune of a Cole Porter score.

Peter Ustinov, as he was in *Nile*, is Hercule Poirot, arriving at a remote Adriatic island resort to rendezvous with a client, a millionaire who has aroused an insurance company's curiosity by trying to insure a worthless stone for £50,000. Before long there's a corpse and eight prime suspects. Beyond Ustinov, who can make a *faux pas* high drama and a don't-go-in-the-water swimming scene a delight, the prime joys of the film are Maggie Smith, delicious as the ex-chorine hotel proprietress, and Diana Rigg, superb as her chorus-line buddy who's gone on to stardom and gold-digging. They're worth the price of admission—even for non-Christie fans.

These entertainments sparkle in the light of recent disappointments. A major one was Francis Coppola's *One From the Heart*, disappointing because it is all technique and effects, with a lovely Tom Waits score and songs sung by Waits and Crystal Gale. What Coppola has described as a "new kind of old-fashioned romance" lacks only a romance to enthrall us. Instead it offers dazzling sets by the mile, bursts of lovely fantasy, moments of exquisite imagination. There is a touch of Fellini here, a bit of *King of Hearts* there, a neon glow and a razzle-dazzle crowd scene in Coppola's studio-built Las Vegas. There is a master technician at work and his artistic aspiration is evident. But where is the substance and the story?

Self-consciously—even patronizingly—Coppola and his screenplay collaborator, Arnyan Bernstein, give us "little" people, Teri Garr and Frederick Forrest, a couple drifting apart after five years. She beguiles herself with Raul Julia, a waiter-entertainer; he encounters a dreamgirl-circus performer, Nastassia Kinski; but Garr and Forrest think of each other and are reunited in a golden glow. Kinski is a lovely creature, but the other three have, on this occasion, not a flicker of charisma. In retrospect, one remembers far more vividly the third bananas, Lainie Kazan and Harry Dean Stanton, who play the lovers' slightly feisty best friends.

Coppola is, after all, one of our foremost filmmakers, and certainly the most

adventurous. But technique—and the "innovation" of electronic studio work with videotape—has absorbed him. This one is from the video control board: The heart is missing.

*Cannery Row*, adapted from Steinbeck's *Cannery Row* and from *Sweet Thursday* by David S. Ward, marks Ward's directorial debut. Ward wrote *The Sting*, but in the course of that film he apparently failed to learn anything from its director, George Roy Hill. This sluggish, plodding, predictable, and—thanks to Sven Nykvist's exquisite cinematography—artsy-smartsy pretentious film is an embarrassing bore. At best it serves to underline the naiveté of Steinbeck's romantic glorification of bums and losers. Nick Nolte is the marine biologist, Debra Winger the bordello girl he falls in love with, and both have done better elsewhere.

Peter Lilienthal's *David*, based on Joel



Nastassia Kinski (center front) in Francis Coppola's *One From the Heart*.

Konig's novel about a Jewish boy in Nazi Germany who escapes to Palestine, is noteworthy because it was filmed in East and West Germany and won the Golden Bear at the 1979 Berlin Film Festival. Lilienthal, himself a boyhood refugee from Nazism, is a Berlin-based filmmaker. His movie, in depicting the plight and attitudes of middle-class Jews, is reminiscent of *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*. But its pedestrian pacing, confused scripting, and unremarkable performances make it a minor addition to the film literature of the Holocaust. ■

Tim Page

## A \$400 Stravinsky Album

**I**gor Stravinsky was born 100 years ago this June. In centennial celebration, CBS Masterworks has just released an elaborate 31-record set (priced at \$400) containing virtually all of his major works, in renditions either conducted or supervised by the composer. It is an impressive package; the listener can trace the course of Stravinsky's career through almost 100 works—from the visionary but rhetorical *Symphony in E Flat* (1905-06) through the composer's charming, oddly appropriate valediction, a 1966 setting of "The Owl and the Pussycat." More than 60 years of work is represented here, and they were revolutionary years. Stravinsky, a pupil of Rimsky-Korsakov, numbered Debussy and Ravel among his early admirers, made his reputation in a world populated by giants such as Mahler, Sibelius, and Richard Strauss, influenced the development of Western music for half a century, and died in 1971 in the era of John Cage, Pierre Boulez, and Milton Babbitt. Throughout the artistic upheaval that has characterized the 20th century, Stravinsky remained a monumental figure, a virtual personification of "modernism" to a succession of generations.

Stravinsky first came to public attention with a brilliant series of ballets produced for Serge Diaghilev's *Ballet Russe*: *The Firebird* (1910), *Petrouchka* (1911), and *Le Sacre du Printemps* (*The Rite of Spring*, 1913). The latter work so scandalized the audience at its premiere—with its free atonality, "barbarous" rhythms, and unprecedented raw, sinuous power—that a full-scale riot terminated the performance. But the composer was also capable of subtler shocks. Shortly after *Sacre*, Stravinsky abandoned the ardent Russian nationalism of his early work and turned to neoclassicism, a formal, temperate antidote to the lush, overmarinated romanticism then

SR's regular record reviewer, Stephen Wadsworth, is taking a leave of absence to write an opera with Leonard Bernstein. Tim Page, his replacement, is a music critic for the *Soho News*.

fashionable. And late in his life, in the early 1950s, Stravinsky would surprise his audience by suddenly adapting the serial techniques developed by Arnold Schoenberg, producing such compositions as *Threni* (1958) and *Requiem Canticles* (1966)—works strongly admired in certain circles but which have yet to attain popular acceptance.

Only a second-rate artist is always at his best, and any chronicle this comprehensive must include a fair amount of



RICHARD AVE DONI, 1969

**Igor Stravinsky: bone-dry as a conductor.**

chaff among the ample wheat. There was something a little coldblooded about Stravinsky, and one can't escape the occasional feeling that his extraordinary compositional technique is artfully concealing a certain spiritual paucity. But one never loses admiration for the way the composer effectively "Stravinskyizes" everything he touches—from Russian folklore to serialism, from charming adaptations of Tchaikovsky and Pergolesi through a unique arrangement of our own "Star Spangled Banner," all included within the CBS package. And there is much to admire in lesser known works: the Olympian serenity and poise of neoclassical gems such as *Orpheus* (1948), say, or the haunting part-writing for organ in the otherwise arid *Canticum Sacrum* (1956).

It is always difficult to judge a composer's performances of his own music.

From a certain perspective such renditions are, *a priori*, definitive—doubly so when the composer was as skilled a conductor as Stravinsky became. This said, it is difficult to imagine a chillier, less sympathetic *Symphony of Psalms* (1930), and it would be instructive to hear some of the thorny later works under another conductor. I am confident there is more life in these pieces than Stravinsky's bone-dry performances let on. Most listeners will have personal preferences for recordings of some of these works led by different conductors; I would not want to be without Bernstein's heartfelt *Symphony of Psalms* (CBS), Ansermet's transplendent *Firebird* (London), Monteux's historic *Sacre du Printemps* (RCA), and several others. But the majority of the CBS recordings are crisp, vigorous, and finely detailed—*echt* Stravinsky, in other words.

I have a few quibbles. The CBS packaging is only fair, and the plastic cover that accompanies this set is cumbersome and highly breakable. And while I enjoy Stravinsky's waspish, witty prose style, here preserved on many of the liner sleeves, I confess I would have gladly sacrificed some of the charm for a bit more hard data. And CBS consistently favors Stravinsky's last, stereophonic recordings; I would have appreciated the opportunity to compare and contrast some of his early 78 RPM discs from the 1920s and 1930s.

But these are minor points. On the positive side, the CBS pressings are absolutely first-rate. Of course, many listeners may be unwilling to purchase 31 records in one grand, decadent splurge; I would hope that CBS eventually decides to release their Stravinsky collection in affordable modules before too long. This is an historic release, and well worth the time and energy that have been spent on it; CBS has not only offered us the recorded documentation of an extraordinary career, but a chance to mark the progression of 20th-century music over a particularly vital 60 years. ■