

Aside from these new short reviews, Excalibur Entertainment will rate films using, whatelse, the symbol of a sword. A film with +++++ indicates a brilliant film that shouldn't be missed; ++++ is very good; +++ fair entertainment; ++ some quality but the overall impression is poor; + absolutely awful; - the filmmakers should be hung.

## Pennies From Heaven +

**Al Locke**  
Herbert Ross and Bob Altman have alot in common. They both made films about the depression; both were musicals; both starred brilliant comedians making their dramatic debut; and both were "BOMBS".

Herbert Ross's latest, "Pennies From Heaven", stars Steve Martin and Bernadette Peters. It takes place in a Brechtian 1934 Chicago, the U.S. "shoulder deep in the Great Depression". Two losers try to fight their way out of their surroundings through dreams, songs, and pretending. For the grand 30's musical numbers, the scenes, costumes, and actors are bright, enthusiastic, and beautiful, a fitting contrast to decaying brown reality of starving people, murder, adultery, rape, prostitution and general bitching. The rest of the film handles that.

The audience would have to be stupid not to recognize the changes in time and place. First, Steve and Bernadette talk through the films "real" moments — for the musical numbers, Ross has painstakingly re-recorded to original 30's tunes an old

recording systems, with the stars mouthing the words. Steve Martin's "dramatic debut" parallels Robin Williams in *Popeye*; he doesn't work either. Ross attempt, at a Brechtian film is very poorly conceived.



Even though Martin is a box office draw — people should stay away from "Pennies From Heaven" in droves. Or as this bomb should be called, *Popeye II*.

## Ragtime

**Ian Bailey**

Long touted as the motion picture event of 1981, *Ragtime*, directed by Milos Forman, is an extraordinary film. It marks the return of James Cagney, after a 20-year absence, to the medium that immortalized him. Furthermore, it is based on the equally extraordinary novel of the same name by National Book Award Winner E.L. Doctorow. This film is a 25-million dollar epic that sharply recreates a 1906 America in a flamboyant historical transition.

But the most dazzling thing about this touching and extravagant examination of turn of the century America (with its Teddy Roosevelt, Gibson Girls, and Ragtime music) is that the whole film works and succeeds, admirably, in drawing the audience back into an age that has been relegated to fading black and white photographs in archives.

The film's storyline, remarkably faithful to the novel, intoxicates us with the age. It is like an interlocking three-ring circus overshadowed by a domineering ringmaster. In seeking to crystallize the times it follows several colorful characters who epitomize features of the Ragtime era.



James Cagney plays New York Police Commissioner Rhinlander Waldo, the man who deals with Coalhouse and his gang. His performance is restrained as befits the wily character he portrays. This restraint is offset, however, by his presence on screen which he maintains with professionalism. It is not, however, Cagney's film.

Sets and street scenes are opulently recreated and populated with hundreds of period people. Photography makes the best of these recreations and Forman keeps scenes short where appropriate, sometimes catching the audience off-guard.

More than a great film, it is a story of the people of an age and what motivated them rather than a romp in cinematic excess as it might have been. The family unit is at the core of the movie and their fate signifies the fate of the age in which they are portrayed.

## Absence Of Malice +++

**E. I. Necakov**

Columbia Pictures "Absence of Malice", directed by Sydney Pollack, begins Dec. 18th at the Hyland and various other theatres. Megan (Sally Field), an over-zealous journalist, learns of an 'investigation' concerning a Mr. Gallagher (Paul Newman) who's connections with 'the mob' are at the onset somewhat vague. Gallagher picks up the morning paper only to learn that he has become newsworthy. The premise of the film is the validity of journalistic 'freedom' in terms of the individual, Gallagher. Megan's incompetence becomes apparent. However, she is portrayed as the 'cute' girl striving for 'truth, justice and the American way.' The victim of her research on the other hand seems rather disinterested as his company goes under while he is engaged in a relationship with her. The climax comes when Wilford Brimley, who plays the judge, disperses with the falsehoods and deals out 'justice for all'.

The film takes up an interesting issue and one well worth dealing with, yet seems to sacrifice a close examination of journalistic zeal and manipulation, for the sake of exploiting a romantic and unreal situation. Pollack merely touches on the problems of misrepresentation and gross misuse of power and leaves it at that. Naturally everything is neatly worked out at the end and a sense of the virtuous society permeates the film's ending. Thus leaving the audience with the impression that any misuse of the media is immediately uncovered and dealt with in due course. Above all 'justice' exists in the American press.

## David Askevold: Under the table art

Liz Alt & Jolanta Morowicz

You can take the influence of art out of York campus, but can you take the influence of York campus out of the artist? David Askevold, photographer and recent addition to York's Visual Arts Department says 'no': "You make different kinds of work for different places. The focus changes and shifts. Is it generated externally or internally? Well, it's like eating food, I guess. You just digest it." Askevold should know. He's made the rounds: educated in Montana, New York City and Kansas City, his recent teaching positions have led him from Halifax to L.A. and finally to Toronto. And this fails to include an impressive host of exhibitions of his work, from Milan to New York, from London to Buenos Aires.

Despite early roots in watercolour, gradually photography took over as his artistic medium. Isn't it somewhat limited as an artistic field? Only cost is a restriction, particularly in video, which Askevold has been working with on and off for 12 years. However, photography is a rich art form, he assures us: "Instead of thinking of a photograph as being a depiction of a surface of a person or a landscape, it is a vehicle toward a jump in perception, toward a mass looming into space. A photograph can almost become a real, substantial, physical thing."

Askevold sets his own standards. He refuses to work within the realm of "fine art photography", which depends on basic aesthetic concepts of balance and composition: "I structure the perception of the image, rather than feed off the ingrained aesthetics of judgment. Otherwise the



difference between a good photograph and a bad photograph all boils down to taste."

A dream-like cloud of landscape, human form and human face, fusing delicately into a hazy mass of colours; blue, brown and white. "Separate images are pushed together onto one negative. They dissolve into one. Each one feeds off the other and must be viewed in that context. That was actually 24 frames of a motion picture, a Sam Peckinpah western, shot with a 1-second shutter exposure. Dreams are definitely an impetus. I try to refocus on the dream and maintain the dreamlike state, representing its atmosphere in a work, like a fiction." It's almost the Freudian-Daliesque dream-world, recapturing the 1920's opposition of forces: reality and unreality in juxtaposition. Askevold denies such an interpretation and the connection with surrealism; however, subconsciously, one has difficulty ignoring the association.

A photoseries, "Ambit", juxtaposes haunting images and convoluted word passages, not unlike two parallel lines running in opposite directions. "It's like a form we're very used to in our culture: the newspaper. A text is used to anchor a picture. I just put another content into it. They may disclose each other, but they anchor at the same time. A lot of people can't decipher the text, including myself."

Deceptively simple and yet complex, "Kepler's Music of the

Spheres Played by Six Snakes" contains a secret wealth of information — (an intricate framework of scientific, philosophical, anthropological, mystical and artistic references) lost in part to the majority of the viewing audience. Perhaps this fact relates back to Askevold's background in anthropology; nevertheless, it stresses the exclusive nature of some of his work. Askevold delights in obscure references and the resulting confusion: a world of hidden meaning lies beneath the surface.

And the uncertainty? the dislocation? the anxiety? The natural human impulse is to connect and justify; Askevold appears to purposefully avoid providing the connecting strands. He admits that it was 'intentional ambiguity' as a content: "It was a feeling at the time I was in L.A., something indigenous to being in that city. But now I'm thinking more about an audience, to avoid a lot of confusion. Video has the potential for that sort of mass appeal."

But don't be convinced that we will be any better off in the future. His work is intended for his peer group as the first critical audience. The rest of us? — well, we're not really 'persona non grata', but we're not the main target: "Some of my works are esoteric, some are more accessible. In this discipline a certain amount of information is necessary in order to perceive something. Of course, some peer group people don't get them any better than anyone else."

## Bakkhai: Best play

**Robyn Butt**

Euripides' *Bakkhai* is a difficult play. Is the god hero, or vengeful villain? Are the people guilty, (because their ancestors were) or only pawns? In one viewpoint God embraces both poles: joy and terror, wonder and horror. His delight is as brilliant as his anger,

and as unrelenting. A god is a being of extremes: whom man would do well to know and better to respect. That's what this production leaves us with.

But consensus also runs that in the end the god's victims are tragic. This is where the production falters: both Pentheus and his mother Agave are made to look like idiots. People you could cheerfully see disembowelled are not tragic. People who are vacant and silly and mistakenly kill their sons are not tragic. People dignified but deluded by power or mystic ecstasy, however, are quite tragic. Brian Smegal and Rosalind Kindler offered articulate performances of these characters; it's regrettable they weren't asked to be noble.

Another problem is the figure of the god Dionysus himself. This god must be the most riveting creature onstage. Unfortunately he isn't. Sandy Crawley combined with ungainly sleeves and a harridan's headpiece looks a bit like a goat-boy in a mystery play. Too bad, because properly imposing costuming might have done it: Crawley is believable when he opens his mouth.

The chorus work was beautiful especially use of veils, but after all ecstasy is EX STASIS: to be,

literally, beyond oneself. These women stayed too Moslem: they never quite relinquished control.

But these are matters of interpretation. In fact Alec Stockwell's production of *The Bakkhai* is marvellous, visually riveting, with highly individualized performances and blocking which becomes the play's second poetry.

Setting it in Afghanistan was brilliant. (Laurels to designer Janine Kroon).

The play has an immediately relevant context with no sacrifice to its possibilities for the exotic. This is certainly the best production at York this year.



The Excalibur Short Story contest is open to all members of the York Community. Entries between 1000-2500 words, will be accepted at the Excalibur offices until January 18, 1982. All entrants will receive a movie poster, or a similar prize, with the winner receiving approximately \$50 worth of books and records.

All entries must include your name, address and phone number.

Flex your creative muscle, and enter soon.