

ALL THAT JAZZ

Dance of death

Bob Fosse is the physio-therapist of the musical, which in recent years has shown signs of terminal irrelevance. It seemed, until his *Cabaret*, that the Broadway/Hollywood musical was on its last legs. *Cabaret* glossed over serious themes (the rise of Nazi Germany and the sexually ambivalent atmosphere of pre-war Berlin) but with dazzling style. In *All That Jazz* Fosse again demonstrates what he does best: put on a good show. The subject of his film is one that is even less suited to the glitter and razzmatazz of Broadway: death.

It was perhaps inevitable in the "Me"-era that people with the means would start to make big films about their own lives: *A Star is Born* and *Rocky* were both personal films, controlled mainly by their star's whims, and *All That Jazz* continues the trend. Not only did Fosse co-write and direct the film, but it is largely autobiographical, its star, Roy Scheider is a even look-alike for the director. The film shows the life of a choreographer whose heart-attack makes him think twice about his wild living, and incidentally think up all sorts of neat production numbers in operating rooms and hospital corridors.

If this sounds distasteful, the film emphasizes that death cannot be dignified, and given that fact, it might as well be celebrated with a chorus line and a song. This is a reversal of the operatic belle mort, and brings with it certain problems and limitations.

All That Jazz starts conventionally enough, with the auditions for a show that, later, will become a metaphor for its choreographer's life. As long as the director keeps the film dancing, all is well: Fosse is superb at staging. The same manic energy and imaginative choreography that made the cabaret scenes in *Cabaret* so vital are repeated here, times three. Particularly good is the depiction of grueling rehearsals and backstage life, and the human toll it exacts. Scheider is appropriately beleaguered, sleeps with a variety of beleaguered women, and takes time out to play some schlocky show-biz scenes with his former wife, herself a performer, and his cute 13 year old daughter. Instead of exploring the real problems of pressures on a show-biz marriage, the whole family gets into the act: why discuss your problems and all that jazz when you can dance them?

When not performing, the film falls back into conventional matinee dialogue, with added references to such "with-it" things as drugs and easy sex. There are also a series of fantasy scenes interspersed with the action, involving a virginally-dressed Jessica Lange, who was last seen on the screen fighting off the advances of a big ape called King Kong. Here she has to bandy psychobabble with Scheider/Fosse, and, as in the former film, her open faced innocent sexuality is generally wasted. Like the dancing, the 'heavy' scenes look good, but don't really say

much.

When the choreographer's life finally catches up with him, the film goes into coronary arrest, and abandons any pretensions of really saying anything seriously about death. The last third of *All That Jazz* is an increasingly manic production number which attains new heights of vulgarity; open heart surgery, along with everything else connected with death in the film, gets the song and dance treatment. Scheider's hospital antics prove that "There's no Business like Show Business." As a metaphor, it's a little thin for the film.

Fosse, however, is as aware as anyone of this, and the film makes several critical comments about the choreographer's work, and by implication, Fosse's. What do you say about a film that realizes its own limitations, and makes a show of them even? Well, that as drama it fails, for one. *All That Jazz* is too calculatingly self-conscious, and too proud of its vulgar facade.

For lovers of a good show, however (and I'm one) it dazzles. Fittingly, Fosse thus continues a Hollywood tradition of style over content, albeit without that Happy End. The film ends in death, but we don't really care, after all the fireworks. In *All That Jazz* the show's the thing. What can we expect next from Fosse, now that he's choreographed his own demise? A musical version of the Vietnam War perhaps, called *The Sound of Napalm? The Cong and I?*

ad unpopular

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by Darrell Dexter

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