

Entertainment

Editor: Agnes Kruchio

A good story gone bad

Reisz' Gambler falters between portrait, romp

By JULIAN BELTRAME

The first time we see Axel Freed, he is losing \$44,000 he does not have.

From here, Axel beds Lauren Hutton, his girl, visits his mother, and teaches English in a New York college, all the while having in the back of his mind that he must come up with the dough before the boys from the mean streets get mean.

James Caan is Axel, a man who would borrow \$45,000 of his mother's hard earned money use it as security to bet on three basketball games, and that night take the same loot to Las Vegas to try his luck in the casino.

Why does he do it? Answer that question and you solve the mystery of Axel Freed, and of Karel Reisz' film, *The Gambler*, just released in Toronto by Paramount.

It takes a little while to realize that Reisz' film is not about a compulsive gambler, but a man who will not play it safe. Axel Freed is such a man, having made the decision that what everyone else does with their lives just will not do.

This explains why so much emphasis is placed on William Carlos Williams' thesis on George Washington, in *The American Grain*. In Williams' thesis George Washington is America itself, hence, find out what George Washington is, and you discover what an American is.

Axel's analysis of Williams' Washington is his justification for doing what he does. Washington is someone who lives in the constant fear of failure, and of taking chances. He is someone who dreams of every kind of sexual experience but hides underneath his wife's petticoats.

And this is what Axel will not be — he will not be an American.

Axel lives his life going from one dangerous situation to another, constantly looking to lose, as he so poignantly perceives himself.

The point is that there is nothing to win, except the momentary satisfaction of knowing you're going to win, and it happens. To win all the time is boring, to lose all the time is impossible.

"I could have cleaned your ass by playing the game's I knew I'd win at," he tells his bookie, Paul Sorvino, to whom he owes the loot. In Las Vegas when Billie (Hutton) tells him he has found his lucky table, he picks up his chips and leaves, muttering, "This was our lucky table."

Axel can only live by coming close to death, by daring it to snatch him, and then pulling away at the very last moment. And so when he finds he must fix a game to save his life, gambling for money loses its appeal and he wanders into Harlem in search of a new game; seeing how close he can get to being killed and still survive.

Unfortunately, the promise that *The Gambler* holds out intellectually is never achieved emotionally. The film never comes together as a unified work, possibly because it does not know whether it wants to be a picture of one man's character, or an exciting romp through the underworld depending heavily on plot and intrigue.

James Caan is not really capable of carrying the whole show himself, and this is just what he is asked to do, because *The Gambler* doesn't take the time to develop any other characters fully.



James Caan is *The Gambler*, who makes gambling a life or death affair, and Lauren Hutton is his girlfriend in a Karel Reisz film that also stars Paul Sorvino. Written by James Toback, the film was shot on location in New York and Las Vegas.

There are plenty of opportunities to do so, as Axel's character lends itself to meeting many different and unusual people. But they only exist in so far as they relate to Axel; no one is important on his own. If he owes money, he must owe it to someone (Sorvino), if he loves he must love some woman (Hutton), and if he corrupts he must corrupt an innocent (college basketball player).

Both the characters played by Paul Sorvino and Lauren Hutton would have been worthwhile developing, but they remain throughout, private lives.

Reisz, whose earlier works have included *Morgan* and *Isadora*, directs the *Gambler* mechanically, never really probing the human side

of Axel's character, but remaining on the intellectual side. His most serious mistake seems to have been his decision to use Gustav Mahler's *Symphony No. 1* as background for the film.

The musical score more than not,

fights what is happening on the screen rather than complimenting it.

Despite all this the film comes very close to becoming a great film, and perhaps it is worthwhile viewing, if only because it is an example of how a good story can go wrong.

Revolution can be fun: how they won the vote

By BOB MCBRYDE

The Red Light Theatre, now operating out of the Enoch-Turner Schoolhouse at 106 Trinity Street, is a theatre troupe with the admirable goal of presenting plays by and concerning women. In *What Glorious Times They Had*, a proficient group of performers mugs its way through an entertaining version of the women's struggle for the vote.

The play, a loosely winning combination of satire, farce, music and play-within-play, records the efforts of Manitoba suffragettes led by Mrs. Nellie McClung and other members of the Political Equality League to defeat the reactionary forces of premier Sir Rodmond Roblin. One's sense of the rigours of their tussle is superseded by a realization that victory is inevitable. The play is a political cartoon with a happy ending.

What Glorious Times They Had conceived and written by Playwright-actress Diane Grant, succeeds admirably within the confines of its seemingly modest ambitions. It does not provide for political theatre in the Brechtian sense, where the audience is alienated from the performance through acting techniques and spectacle in order that the individual might evaluate intellectually the complicated issues being demonstrated.

In the case of *What Glorious Times They Had*, the audience is

won over by the play's action while still retaining a certain detachment from it. The intellectual evaluation elicited is generally on the level of "those were the bad-yet-fun old days" rather than the more disturbing reaction of "these problems are manifest today, only in different forms".

Playwright Grant wishes us to take time out in order to celebrate past victories. Moreover, she sees her theatre as filling a serious gap in the Canadian historical perspective. The play nostalgically records an important and unique contribution made by Canadian women to our cultural mosaic.

The important contribution of the Red Light performers to Toronto's theatre scene is just as apparent. All the players are multi-skilled. Diane Grant herself is energetic and versatile as Nellie McClung while her sisters in the cause, played by Francine Volker, Marcella Lustig and Valerie von Voltz, exhibit charm, grace and especially wit. They croon old songs of the age with tongue-in-cheek sincerity.

Paul Brown, who plays a number of farcical and semi-serious roles with hilarious abandon, finds a suitable forum for his talents in *What Glorious Times They Had*. His skills, along with those of Paul-Emil Frappier as the irascible Sir Roblin, allow the play to achieve competence on all levels.



Francine Volker and Elizabeth Murphy in *What Glorious Times They Had*.

The essential Canadian exposed

By AGNES KRUCHIO

That mysterious creature, the Canadian identity, got another jolt last week when John Howe, the director of the new Canadian film hit *Why Rock the Boat?* now at the Four Seasons Sheraton, declared at a press conference that the bumbling, wishy-washy non-entity Harry Barnes is "the essential Canadian."

Harry Barnes, is a cub-reporter on a hypothetical Montreal newspaper in the 40s, the *Montreal Daily Witness*, which was, in the words of one of its employees the "courageous defender of the overdog". Harry Barnes is ambitious — but yet at one point in the film the only reason his tyrannical boss does not fire him is because "he is the worst paid employee in the whole organization" and thus he has sentimental value.



Tili Leek is the frigid Julia in the new Canadian hit comedy *Why Rock the Boat?* which proves that Canadians can laugh at themselves.

Harry is shy and awkward. He is naive, gullible, and uncertain of his political leanings. He has great visions of himself as a debonair ladykiller, but when it comes down to the nitty-gritty, it turns out that at 21 he is still struggling to lose his hated virginity.

Harry is easily impressed — the hardest part of the movie to understand for a modern audience is what on earth he sees in lifeless, frigid Julia, whose most romantic trait is her name.

"But the most important thing about Harry Barnes," says Howe, "is his innocence."

"Harry is living in a dream world. He has been bombarded by the media into believing all sorts of rubbish. People were starving in the 30s, and yet films were there to tell them that the world was full of roses, just for the picking." Howe, who was born in 1926, is talking from direct experience.

"Barnes has a crush on Julia," says Howe, "because she fits the chocolate-box doll-like quality that was the female ideal of the 40s, with blonde hair, blue eyes and all."

The production of the movie had started before the whole 'nostalgia kick' said William Weintraub, the author of the book and the script, also at the conference (he wrote the book in 1962). Both he and Howe felt that the elusive 'Canadian quality' would best come across in just such a period piece. "The atmosphere in those days was all for king and country in Canada," explained Howe, "and movie characters were so much more innocent."

One of the difficult things to do was to get across to the lead actors,

both of them in their twenties, the social environment of the 40s. Howe told them endless stories to this end. Small details like Julia, who is a very properly brought up young lady, not going into the room of a man where the bed was not made up seemed to be, seen with modern eyes, unduly important.

While the film is not intended to reflect the political background of the Duplessis regime, lines concerning the impossibility of finding an honest politician will receive warm reception by contemporary audiences. Even though the events of the film were not factual, they "easily could have been."

"Unionism was a big thing in those days and there were in fact spies of the employer at union meetings," related Howe. "Unionism in Canada was considered related to communism and no one wanted any part of it."

But Harry loses his innocence, along with his virginity in the end to Shaw Festival's Paxton Whitehead's sensuous wife Patricia Gage who had appeared opposite Peter Finch in *England Made Me*.

In the end, like Canada in the 60s, says Howe, Harry Barnes grows up.

After the \$450,000 project, John Howe has no plans except to take the movie to the U.S. While *Why Rock the Boat* is a thoroughly Canadian movie, Howe believes that it will be successful in the States because it contains 'simple truths' about people, and yet states them in a uniquely Canadian idiom. He believes that *Why Rock the Boat* is a first step in establishing a Canadian image to go with the newly formed Canadian identity.