



# Lights, Camera, Action!

By DAN MERKUR

Francois Truffaut's most recently released film, *Bed And Board*, marks his return, both stylistically and creatively, to his origins. *Bed And Board* is the third, the latest, and allegedly the last of Truffaut's autobiographical films about "Antoine Doinel."

As in *The 400 Blows* and *Stolen Kisses*, Jean-Pierre Leaud again has the principle role. Which is to say, he again gives an unmatched performance.

*Bed And Board* chronicles an essentially melodramatic era of Doinel's life, beginning sometime after his marriage to a pretty girl of middle-class origins. In classic style, the girl becomes pregnant and Doinel has an affair. Separation and the traditional reconciliation follow, but not before Doinel has learned for himself the diligence, the perseverance and the self-denial necessary to the artist, by writing an autobiographical novel about his childhood in the slums of Paris.

Which roughly parallels Truffaut's making of *The 400 Blows*, his first film, about the misery and the coming of maturity to an unwanted child, a hard-boiled Parisian delinquent. With *Bed And Board* the story ends, and Truffaut has said that he intends to take it no farther.

## Historical fact

I assume that *Bed And Board*, in its conception of the story of Doinel, bases the events on historical fact. Strangely, the events of the plot have the predictability of a Doris Day-Rock Hudson feather-tossing epic.

I do not mean this with condemnation. *Bed And Board* is as original as they come. Yet we must remember that there are, after all, only 27 plots. I only mention these facts because *Bed And Board* is so brilliant that you have to be a critic and searching for really odd material so as not to run too quickly out of superlatives in order to come up with this kind of stuff.

Essentially, *Bed And Board* is a light, sophisticated, witty marital comedy of great invention. Melodramatic, it is true, but played for its farcical values. Somehow, it is played with a sincerity of purpose that belies the facility of the humour.

Or to put it more simply, it is one of the best damn comedies since the late thirties, which is a hell of a long time to be waiting at the popcorn counter for something worthwhile to go back and sit down to see.

Stylistically it is a return for Truffaut to his years as a film critic studying the masters, in that the film was carefully made to resemble the films of Rene Clair and Ernst Lubitsch, who pioneered the bedroom farce with such taste and ability that they

remain absolutely without peers. Although other individuals have made single comedies that rank with their bodies of work.

Truffaut, time and again, deliberately positioned his actors in classic Lubitsch poses, and then forced himself to improve on Lubitsch's camera placement. The result is just incredible, as anyone can tell who has seen Godard's *A Woman Is A Woman*, which was also a tribute to Lubitsch, using the Viennese blocking, but only copying his camera movement, and not innovating. Truffaut is clearly the greater artist.

There is very little one can write in reviewing a film of this sort. It is simply brilliant. No less. It is, however, so simple,



In the 30s, it would have been Maurice Chevalier and Jeanette MacDonald in a film by Ernst Lubitsch in an identical pose, with a mood of Victorian prudery in conflict with Gallic realism. Truffaut does it in his own way, for a different era.

that under analysis there is nothing left. It has the tritest of stories. It has the most implausible of plots. It is a comedy about marriage in 1970! and among Frenchmen! no less. Who would figure anyone could come up with a film out of that? And to have it come up brilliant? There is very little one can write.

I do find, however, that this is precisely the opportunity to bring home the fact that it always, always reduces to a matter of aesthetics. Not how important the story is. Not how relevant the themes are. Not how contemporary the acting is. Not how "now" the jargon is. But how well the film is made, how well it portrays real people. Never forget that feature film is inherently realistic beyond Hemingway-Faulkner-Mailer realism). That is always the question. Not merely with film, but with all the arts. It always reduces to how good the work is, how faithful it is to the reality from which it derives.

That is why there have never been anti-war indictments greater, in film, than Jean Renoir's *La Grande Illusion*, nor, in literature, than Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Peter Watkins' *The War Game* and all the liberal, underground and revolutionary writings notwithstanding.

It is always a question of aesthetics, of the talent brought to bear. And as anyone may see from the fresh breath given the most hackneyed of all stories in *Bed And Board*, Truffaut is a great talent and a master artist.

A propos of Peter Watkins, I met him last week. I expected to be confronted by an angry zealot, infuriated by the repression of

as-usual, capitalist establishment. Watkins is a very committed young man, very brave, I think, and of course, not well thought of by the money men.

He is, however, a controversial figure, and as such he gets around and makes himself heard.

Next came *Privilege*, which has proved strangely prophetic in its postulation of the potential power of a rock star in our culture. Most recently there is *Gladiators*, a strange allegory about the international war machine being epitomized in olympic-style war manoeuvres, a new sort of war game. Enter the revolutionary element embodied as a French college student dedicated to destroying the machine that runs the gladiatorial games. Of course Watkins showed clearly how the revolutionary is only a part of the game the machine has allowed for, and who, in fact, eventually takes control, albeit changing the machine to accommodate himself, but mostly serving the machine's ends.

However the Allied forces capture a Chinese soldier, who proves to be a girl. She and a British soldier fall in love, and they attempt to desert. The machine, actually aided by the French student, eventually destroys them, but the narrator speaks plainly, explaining that since the lovers had decided not to play the game at all, they were the only true danger, for in opting out, they denied the very validity of the power "game" which, at least, the revolutionary recognized as a necessity, although an unpleasant one.

## Extremely persuasive

Watkins is currently speaking wherever he can on the repression of the mass media, and the danger it constitutes. As a speaker he is extremely persuasive, and though one never has doubted the fact of repression or the danger of repression, Watkins brings home the immediacy and the immensity of this danger, this horror of our society. He makes it clear why he gives this facet of the revolution priority. He never once spoke for anyone more than himself. He did not need to.

I asked him how he can have come to the conclusions he had in *Gladiators*, and still play the part of the French Student. He replied only that he had to and that he was moving more and more into helping other documentarists, and was spending much less time on his own film efforts. He does have a documentary on poverty in the U.S. to be released soon.

Watkins is not a great filmmaker. His talent as an artist limits greatly his ability to express himself on film, which is a tragedy, considering the dedication and the courage of the man. So he has gone into the training of others, and into production (as opposed to creation) of films. Viva!

# The Brothers: it rivals Dionysus '69 & '70

By BRIAN PEARL

If you're looking to get your mind blown sometime, wander down to the Studio Lab Theatre at Queen and Yonge, pay two-fifty and live through their production of *The Brothers*, if you can. This modern-undress version of an ancient Roman play by Terrence of Carthage has been given a few contemporary gooses by Rex Deverell and Ernie Schwartz with his prize cast of fabulous freaks. This is the second such modern 'adaptation' Studio Lab has done (*Dionysus* in '69 and '70 is the other) and I won't be the first to write that given the continued rapid development the play has already undergone in previews, *The Brothers* could become as popular as its predecessor, *Dionysus*. *The Brothers* is as intense and hilarious, exciting and disturbing, seductive and disgusting as *Dionysus* and much more fascinating than any other play in Toronto this year.

## One big ball

How could I describe a farcical freak show, a burlesque carnival and the freest of existential Living Theatre techniques all rolled into one big ball and thrown at the unsuspecting audience? You walk through a door in the wings with a flashing green 'go' cue-light over it to enter the freak show of vanity, obsessive sexuality, pretentious creativity and cliched soothsaying, which passes on to the burlesque review and play. The mistress (or madam) of ceremonies, a

broad named Sistrata was played with real grossness by Fran Gebhard, who combined Mae West, Belle Barth and Joanne Worley (that incredible bitch on *Laugh-In*) to the exact proportions.

The classical plot is loaded with the classical complications. Two brothers, Aeschinus and Ctesipho have been raised separately by two brothers of the previous generation, Micio and Demia. Demia is a strict Roman farmer-type and his son, Ctesipho (pronounced Stesifo) is a hick, a hayseed that his city brother, Aeschinus quickly matches to a stripper and leaves. Aeschinus, then seduces and impregnates Pamphilia, Sostrata's snot-nosed daughter (Sostrata is a widow). Finally, in an orgy of soap-opera climaxes, everyone marries every one else to simply end the plot, but that only describes the plot, not the play.

## Role swappings

Based on that thin structure is the wierdest set of theatrical gymnastics I have ever seen, running from role-swapping to audience involvement in a most peculiar way in an obscene way as a matter of fact. The role-swapping is the most impressive, incredible thing about the play. The players all have these life-like, expressive masks to keep the roles straight while the parts of Aeschinus and Pamphilia are played by both Rosemary Burris and Don Porter, switching periodically. As well as that changing, the *Dancing Girl* is played seductively by

Norman Quinlan wearing a mask with a saucy grimace and a G-string, and Demia is played by Rita Deverell. All the switches are directed plausibly to point out the ridiculous collage of gestures and superfluous expressions that go to make up the flimsy substance of male and female character.

## Audience participation

The audience participation parts are, of course, the most flexible, or adjustable, of the show. A player, dressed in a baggy southern-style cream-coloured suit, stands up in the audience and protests the obscenity, the "pillution" of the plot and proceeds to demonstrate the meaning of "pillution" to the audience by asking two volunteers to read a scene from a play Studio Lab did two years ago, *The Beard*. The passage contains some obscene words, acts and other erotica which the volunteers find themselves reading publicly. The results vary, of course, but the night I saw the play, the guy blushed and mumbled a lot while the girl brazened it out, finally offering to enact the stage directions and really 'go all the way'. The protestor was then collected by the on-stage cast and ejected, only to return later, slightly bloodied to select two more couples to enact the positions of a lewd photograph. That night, the couples laid down and spread out like some kind of sheep, and didn't dare move

for five minutes for fear of an instant public orgy. Very funny, indeed. The director and cast really should arrange to expand and enhance these audience involvement parts because they add a lot of fun to the play.

## Weird magician

The final, and weirdest act of the play was the magician's act, where Aeschinus is confronted with the pregnant Pamphilia and forced by the magician to admit he loves her. When he does, the magician performs an 'abortion' on Pamphilia and draws a rubber snake from her belly. When Aeschinus complains that he wants a child, the magician draws a live rabbit from his abdomen and everyone is either exhausted or happy. The essence of the act's effect is an archtypal mysticism that invades and occupies the stage during this mind-boggling passage.

There is a lot of room for improvement in *The Brothers*, but that's only because the show is so widespread in its attacks that it can plausibly spread in all directions, and I, for one, would like to return to Studio Lab and watch this intense play with the imaginative style and talented cast (I haven't had space to tell you how good each player was, even great players like Rosemary Burris) develop into a play that really lives and changes, unique and unparalleled on the modern stage.