

Anne Bancroft and Mel Brooks in a scene from *To Be or Not To Be*.

A subdued Brooks in Lubitsch remake

By IAN M. CLARKE

The year is 1939. Hitler marches on Poland and disrupts, among other things, the activities of the Bronski Theatrical Company, under the directorship and starring the "world-renowned" Frederick Bronski. The small troupe is forced into covert operations and furiously mine the doubtful depths of their thespian experience in order to prevent the complete annihilation of the Polish underground. Laughs are exchanged for gunfire and love blooms among the ruins.

War has provided the platform for many films which convey a comic-absurdist viewpoint juxtaposed over a genuine terror of death. *M*A*S*H* and *Catch-22* are both epitomes of how giggles are generated through the hysteria of destruction. *To Be or Not To Be*, though heavily farcical in nature, successfully ignites the crazed antics of Frederick Bronski (played by Mel Brooks) against the encroaching Nazi menace.

The film is a re-make of Ernst Lubitsch's 1942 classic of the same title, and evokes the war-time period with elaborate faithfulness.

The name Mel Brooks has come to be associated with belly laughs and excessive vulgarity. Never before has he been so subdued. As Brooks neither

wrote nor directed *To Be or Not To Be*, his influence has been modified into an exemplary comic performance (the "Highlights from Hamlet" sequence is Brooks at his best). Equally impressive is Anne Bancroft as his wife, Anna Bronski—a woman who is flirtatious but sincere. Tim Matheson wisely underplays his role as Lieutenant Andre Sobinski, keeping a multifarious plot-line in order.

In the past, Brooks demonstrated a burgeoning talent for musical composition, heard especially in his films *The Producers* and *Blazing Saddles*. This time around it comes to fruition with the ditties "Ladies" and "A Little Peace."

Director Alan Johnson is to be commended, firstly, for not deriding the horror of the times with obsessive parody or neglect, and secondly, for achieving the monumental victory of keeping Mel Brooks under control.

To Be or Not To Be is at once a comedy-musical-suspense package and undoubtedly a top contender for holiday audiences. If you wince with revulsion at the name Mel Brooks, this film may change your mind. Here is the opportunity to enjoy a new and more subtle dimension of a great comic talent. The film opens December 16.

records

In the lions' den

Various Artists
The Young Lions
(Elektra Musician)
••½

The Young Lions is the name of an eagerly-anticipated album featuring 17 of the brighter young stars in progressive jazz, assembled for a concert at the Kool Jazz Festival in New York a couple of summers ago. But the choice of musicians does not always jibe with the young lion concept. Hamiet Bluiett, now 43, was more of a young lion when he played with Mingus at Carnegie Hall 10 years ago. The lion status accorded to vocalist Bobby McFerrin and guitarist Kevin Eubanks by their inclusion in the group may have more to do with the fact that they already have recording contracts with the label responsible for this album than with any unique musical talent.

The music itself is quite varied, ranging from pieces for the whole 17-man ensemble such as Craig Harris' beautiful African-inspired "Nigerian Sunset," to the straight-ahead blowing of small groups with people like Chico Freeman and James Newton, to the opening cut, "B 'n' W," featuring the wordless vocal acrobatics of Bobby McFerrin in an improvised dialogue with the trumpet of Wynton Marsalis.

It's not likely that anyone familiar with the past work of these musicians will find much here to be particularly earthshaking, or adventurous. There are some excellent performances, some disappointments, and most of all, a wide-ranging presentation of some of the

many forms and innovators of today's jazz.

—STEVEN HACKER

Fresh Oregon

Oregon
Oregon
(ECM)
•••½

In many ways, this album marks a kind of new beginning for Messrs. Townner, Walcott, Moore and McCandless. First of all, *Oregon*, the album, is the group's first for the German ECM label. Oregon always seemed to be a natural for Manfred Eicher's introspective productions. The immediate change from this switch to a smaller company seems to be a new emphasis on collective compositions and improvisations, as opposed to the "pretty songs" of the past.

A second noticeable difference is the band's use of technology, mainly Ralph Towner's current obsession with his Prophet V synthesizer (fortunately, the instrument is used quite tastefully and with restraint to add orchestral layers). In the band's earlier years, the use of non-acoustic instrument wouldn't have even been considered as a possibility, as Oregon seemed to implicitly be advocating a position that only pure acoustic music is virtuous.

Times change, though, and so do musicians. In the case of Oregon this change always seems to be quite positive. *Oregon* is not radically different from past work. It is, though, different enough (particularly in respect to the high number of group pieces) to keep the music fresh and worth listening to.

It is a hard balance to strike, but Oregon has managed to do it remarkably well.

—HOWARD GOLDSTEIN

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LAST ISSUE for 1983!

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by Bertolt Brecht
translated by Norbert Ruebsaat
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Paul Gross as "Garga"
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