

truckin' with grahame green's aunt and nephew

George Cukor's latest movie, *Travels With My Aunt*, currently playing at the Westmount cinema, is one of the most entertaining movies to come to town since the post-Christmas movies-jamb began to break up. *Travels With My Aunt* is one of those movies that has certain definite charms, but almost get overlooked in the movie industry's heady dash to garner every Oscar nomination around. At times, cooler heads prevail and some attention is paid to foreign movies and movies not in the big blockbuster category that *The Godfather* obviously belongs in. In this instance, some of those eyes have lighted on *Travels With My Aunt* and picked out Maggie Smith and deservedly so. Smith's sterling performance is a true delight. She is utterly triumphant in a role which calls for genuine virtuoso acting, rather than personality emoting.

Maggie Smith's performance is not the only delight in this film. There is also Alex McCowen, whom you'll remember for his performance as a Scotland Yard inspector in Alfred Hitchcock's last film, *Frenzy*. In *Frenzy*, McCowen provided some of the more entertaining moments in what would otherwise have been just another small part. This time McCowen has gotten out from under the presiding and over-shadowing eminence of Hitchcock. As a presence in this film he shares full honours with Maggie Smith.

McCowen's character is the spine for the story line in this script. Grahame Green's story is perceived through the eyes of Henry Pulling. Henry is a bank manager. A London bank manager. Henry is a thoroughly prissy neuter whose sole condescension to passionate involvement with life is a weakness for cultivating dahlia's. In the midst of the process of seeing his recently deceased mother's ashes disposed of in a suitably appropriate manner, he is snapped up off his weary banker's feet by his Aunt Augusta. She swirls into his life unannounced and plunges him into an ill-considered whirlwind dash across the Continent via the Orient Express.

She first appears like a Yangtze gunboat in drag at her sister's funeral and greets Henry with the news that her sister was not really Henry's mother. Augusta's erratic behavior at first frightens, then charms, then fascinates Henry. Finding himself motherless twice on the same day, Henry reluctantly gravitates towards Augusta's world in a state of confusion. Appearing like an apparition from some dimly remembered schoolboy novel, she is the epitome of the novel's creation: that fascinating character, the family eccentric. She is the black sheep of the family that one always hears whispers about, but never meets.

Augusta is in her seventies, and lives with her current lover, a Negro she calls Wordsworth. Henry, being the

fair-minded proper soul that he is, listens to her tales with sympathy. Amused but confused, Henry writes her off as an entertaining diversion that brought him back to the world of the living. Her entrance has provided a reminder that life is for the living and signalled the end of his mourning for his mother, or at least for what he had thought of as his mother. Revived, he returns to lavishing tender, loving care on his Dahlia's. Aunt Augusta has other ideas, however, and within hours Henry discovers that his mother's ashes have been replaced with pot by Wordsworth and that the police are on both his tail and Augusta's. His Aunt indicates that a hasty but discreet trip to Paris is in order. In desperation, Henry casts off his banker's mein, gathers his courage, and his bags, and puts himself in Augusta's hands.

The movie is a record of Henry's liberation. Finding himself in a Hardy Boy novel

adventure he has grown to old for, Henry is humanized by a series of shocks administered by Augusta. The shocking details of her life knocks the stuffiness out of Henry. His Aunt's chequered career has been convoluted for so long that it has finally dissolved into a state of affairs where she has been reduced to actually smuggling currency into foreign countries. At present her problems are compounded by the fact that she is frantically trying to raise a hundred thousand dollars to pay ransom demands for her long-departed lover, Visconti. The ransom demands come to her in strange places, wrapped around anatomical reminders such as a finger in London and an ear in Milan.

McCowen's performance is a miracle of understatement and timing. Henry is at first amazingly human and yet waspishly stuffy. As he evolves from his cocoon there is a growth of warmth and the instinctive clutching at life that

has long been delayed in his character development. It is the portrait of a middle-aged man, back-tracking through time so as to catch up on the unspent years of his youth.

McCowen is a perfect foil for the pyrotechnics of Smith's caricature. Henry's blandness of character define the very edges of Augusta's awesomely

eccentric behavior. If the movie fails at all, it is here that it fails. The character of Augusta dominates the major portion of the film in terms of time. Although it is Henry's liberation that forms the plot's spine, the movie has to spend a great deal of time exposing the nature of the liberating forces.

Because the incidents which shaped Augusta's character lie in her past, Cukor is obliged to use flashback sequences in which Augusta relives her youthful extravagances. We become more fully acquainted with Augusta in this manner but while we admire Smith's skill in portraying a wide age range in her character, Augusta beings to lose some of her

mystery and becomes a vulnerable person. When we begin to empathize with Augusta's problems and are assured that Henry is no longer a lost soul, then the comedy begins to flicker and fade in the last reel.

Cukor's direction demonstrates a keen eye for detail and a vulnerable compassion for his characters. By allowing his characters to reveal so much of themselves, he allows them to appeal to us as humans. This is a slightly risky gamble that sometimes puts a damper on the comedy created by characters that have been conceived as near-caricatures. Comedy needs a certain distance between player and spectator is it is to succeed. Once we feel the pain we stop laughing just as we stop laughing when we slip on the same banana skin that the Bishop slipped on. Cukor's gamble works more often than not because the characterizations are all in competent hands. Cukor's movie makes a fine showcase for the talents of his cast and Graham Greene's fantasia.

Walter Plinge

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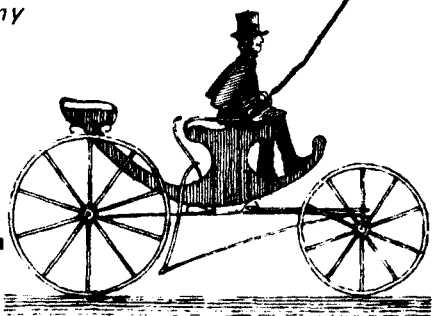
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W. H. Barth



an offer

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Currently playing at the Odeon is Michael Winner's thriller, *The Mechanic*. As a directorial debut it marks a reasonably auspicious beginning for a Hollywood career. As a thriller it is one that is definitely a cut above the average. *The Mechanic* is a slick, expensive, businesslike piece of work. The greater part of Winner's achievement resides in the fact that he has managed to manufacture a taut and quite reasonable diversion out of a slim script that is distinguished by an uncomplicated, almost simplistic story line rendered in uninspiring dialogue that sometimes threatens to become downright insipid. Lewis John Carlino's script is concerned with one Arthur Bishop who is employed as a 'hit man'. Bishop is by trade an accomplished killer who is rapidly being aged by the tensions of his singular profession. The action

progresses when the son of one of Bishop's victims strikes up a friendship through dogged determination and then proceeds to persuade Bishop to take him under his wing as an apprentice. Bishop, aware that he can't survive forever takes him on. The apprenticeship period is brief and soon they are at work as a team, decimating crooks that have chosen to march to the beat of a different drummer than that of their employer. Bishop's overlords are not overly enthused by his acquisition of a partner and steps are taken to bring him back into the party line. This leaves one or two plot twists remaining but to relate them would be to give away the meagre ironies of Carlino's script. They're obvious enough so you can't miss if you decide to see the movie.

The movie's most glaring flaw is in the casting. Outside of the two central characters

the cast is curiously and uniformly pitiful. One conspicuously wooden performance comes from Jill Ireland as a fantasy-vending prostitute. Another performance only slightly less wooden comes from Linda Ridgeway as a would-be suicide. Charles Bronson holds the film together as Arthur Bishop, the mechanic of the title. Bronson does so with more success than one would expect. Bronson is currently one of the top box office draws in Europe. Presumably this film was partly designed to further enhance his reputation in North America. His performance here gives some hint of why he is so popular in Europe and some indication that he may be learning to act after all those years of muscle flexing and the tongue-tied shoulder shrugging that has marked his earlier performances in such movies as *The Magnificent Seven* and *The Great Escape*.

Jan-Micheal Vincent as Steve McKenna, Bishop's erstwhile apprentice gives little indication of skill or promise of an exciting future. He is adequate but since he is always in the mechanic's shadow he never honestly has the opportunity to steal any of the thunder from Bronson. Vincent never quite manages to reach into the depths of his character or to illuminate his characterization with any original insights. As a beginning professional killer he is casual but hardly callous enough to be convincing. He exists mostly as a foil for Bronson who does all the suffering and personal agonizing during the sleepless nights that mark the toll that his profession takes of a man.

Winner's direction of *The Mechanic* presents us with a

portrait of the killer as mechanic as artist. Bishop is a cool, accomplished death merchant with a bag of lethal tricks which he employs with a perfectionists skill and an artists flair. Winner's almost surreal presentation of the elaborate machinations by which selected victims are brought to the end of their lines succeeds in anaesthetizing the violence on the screen. We sit, detached, watching the clockwork mechanisms ticking off final moments of existence. At no time is the violence visceral as it is in the hands of other directors such as Peckinpah whose work is comparatively much more intimate and personal.

In *The Mechanic* the emphasis is on machinery. Cameras, chemicals, scuba gear, and motorcycles provide an ideal outlet for Winner's passion for location shooting. This is particularly true in an overly long motorcycle chase set piece that pales before it comes to its inevitably fatal end.

Despite its shortcomings Winner's movie is a clean and clear-cut craftsmanlike project that rises above most other thrillers. He has manipulated his materials with some competence and a feeling for tension. There are no stunningly effective moments nor are there any pretensions towards a work of art. It is strictly a commercial piece of work. Doubtlessly it will appeal to a fair sized audience both as a thriller and as a showcase for Bronson's presence. As a first effort it is a sufficiently strong showing to insure that Winner will be around making movies for some time. He may yet make a truly fine movie. If only his casting improves.

Walter Plinge