

BOB AND CAROL AND TED AND ALICE,
LION'S LOVE

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CALIFORNIA E.A.T. WAVE
EXPERIMENTS IN ART AND TECHNOLOGY

JAMES EARL JONES
THE GREAT BLACK HOPE

bach,
humbug!

Byron L. Robley

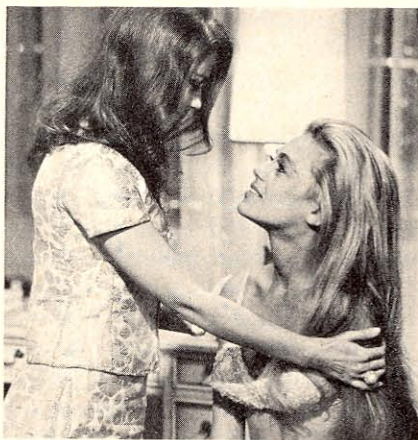


BOB AND CAROL AND TED AND ALICE is a screwball comedy without screwballs. It comes alive in the screwballish, kinky way American situation comedies did in the Thirties and early Forties, and audiences respond to it because they think it is really as free-wheeling and dirty-minded as it pretends to be. But when director Larry Tucker turns out not to be a screwball after all, but a cherub-faced innocent in hippie drag, there is a predictable, sour aftertaste. Audiences feel put-on — like watching Richard Nixon say, "Sock it to me!" on Rowan and Martin's LAUGH-IN.

BOB AND CAROL AND TED AND ALICE was written by Tucker and Paul Mazursky (they had previously scripted I LOVE YOU, ALICE B. TOKLAS). It has its roots in SECOND CITY revue theater, zany American comedy, and the sincere, bizarre life-style of hip Southern California, which anywhere else would pass for affectation.

Robert Culp and Natalie Wood are a wealthy, superficially-intelligent, hip couple (he is a documentary film-maker) whose experiences with truth and emotional

woman") but also in the casual, improvisational set-ups. The pace is unconventional; Tucker lets the situation and our interest in it build informally with pauses, halts, and bursts of repartee. The audience is not programmed for laughs as in TV situation comedies or Blake Edwards's films. They can watch BOB AND CAROL AND TED AND ALICE with *ease*, both taking and leaving it. Tucker's confidence in the viewer's sense of humor does not go unrewarded. BOB AND CAROL AND TED AND ALICE is a rare comedy which gives its viewers horse — and hoarse — laughs.



Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice

candor at an Esalen-style institute lead to infidelity and almost to wife-swapping with their best friends, Elliott Gould and Dyan Cannon. The film has an immediate sense of excitement, not only in the candid dialogue ("I know what an affair is," Culp says in exasperation, "It's when you ball another

Because its pace and style are different, the viewer has the tendency to take the film at face value—to think it really is a dirty, raucous comedy. But Tucker has hedged his bets: his film isn't merely funny, it's social comment. The orgy fails to materialize when the couples suddenly sober up in bed, dress,

BOB AND CAROL AND TED AND ALICE ... (AND AGNES)

by Paul Schrader

and walk outside their Vegas hotel to join the growing swarm of technicians, extras, and assorted freaks who greet each other, kiss, and embrace, all to the blatant background of Jackie DeShannon's "What the World Needs Now is Love." In the midst of this mock-up be-in appears the chubby, beaming face of Tucker, and one suddenly realizes, By God, he really means it. Tucker's melioristic finale discredits the whole of BOB AND CAROL AND TED AND ALICE. What had first appeared to be the fat on the bones turns out to be the soggy heart of the film. The dead weight, misfired gags, and sophomoric parody are not so much failed comedy as failed seriousness. The opening broad satire of the Esalen Institute (nudes sun-worshipping to Handel's HALLELUJAH CHORUS) fails not only because it is bad Terry Southern, but because its *earnestness* undermines the comic style of the rest of the film. Scenes where the parody simply seems to be below the threshold of laughter (the Esalen encounter, the first dinner conversation of the

couples) are held back by Tucker's willingness only to attack the seriousness of his characters and not his own. A comic cannot issue the invitation at the abandonment of screwball comedy and try to keep his own inhibitions.

Tucker and Mazursky are caught in their own web. The reasons that BOB AND CAROL AND TED AND ALICE comes alive are also the reasons it becomes lifeless. The politicalization of the American populace and the opening-up of American lifestyles has brought forth this free-swinging form of humor, but it also deadens it with good intentions and seriousness. In political America everybody's opinions are important (the man-on-the-street interview), and the new unalienable right, is the right to be taken seriously. This politicalization has spawned piercing comics like Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl, and Jackie Mason, but it also uproots the older generation of comics who, like the Marx Brothers, were great because they knew when not to be serious. Don Rickles concludes his monologues with inspirational soliloquies; Jerry Lewis speaks at college forums — doesn't *anybody* want to be a nut anymore? Tucker and Mazursky seem to be born nuts; they are exciting because they can bring zaniness back into our lives, and the last thing we want from them — and the last thing they can give — is a tragi-comic or political comment.

Several years ago there was the hope that DR. STRANGELOVE would be the new THIN MAN, bringing forth a whole new generation of madcap comedies. This hope was never realized because the truly mad, screwball comedies like STANGELOVE, LORD LOVE A DUCK, THE LOVED ONE, and THE PRESIDENT'S ANALYST never brought their humor down to the vulgar, believable, situational level, and the better situation comedies dealing with ordinary characters — like THE FORTUNE COOKIE, THE FLIM-FLAM MAN, GOOD-BYE COLUMBUS, and BOB AND CAROL AND TED AND ALICE — were afraid to risk the madness and anti-intellectualism of great screwball comedy. BOB AND CAROL AND TED AND ALICE demonstrates that there is a market for more madcap comedy apart from

political comedy. But it also demonstrates that the comics who are best prepared to fill this gap, men like Tucker and Mazursky as well as Lewis and Rickles, are too socially concerned on the superficial level to realize the greater importance of non-serious comedy in terms of their own talent. What the world needs now, as always, is love, but what Tucker and Mazursky need is the taste, intelligence and arrogance to become true screwballs.

Agnes Varda's LION'S LOVE disproves one misconception about the "New Cinema": that new techniques necessarily imply new ideas



Lion's Love

or sensibilities. LION'S LOVE is self-consciously new in all the ways TIME MAGAZINE is likely to write about, but at heart it comes straight from the myth of old Hollywood.

LION'S LOVE is an homage to Hollywood a la Warhol and Godard. It was made as inexpensively as film stock would allow and its completion was never certain. The plot is sporadic, but some things do happen: Warhol superstar Viva and HAIR co-authors James Rado and Gerome Ragni live as a threesome in a plush, plastic Hollywood Hills home. New York film-maker Shirley Clark moves in as she prepares to make a film about the "real Hollywood." She attempts suicide the same day Robert Kennedy and Warhol are shot, but survives. LION'S LOVE was filmed with long takes and improvisational set-ups and features the sort of idle chatter common to Warhol movies.

Like her film-maker husband, Jacques Demy, Agnes Varda has made a film in reaction to her stay in garish Southern California.

Demy's film, MODEL SHOP, was, in his own words, about the "poetry of Los Angeles." Varda's film is more ostensibly about the vulgarity of Los Angeles, specifically the exhilarating philistinism of the movie industry. But, as Varda would be the first to argue, there is a poetry in the vulgarity.

LION'S LOVE looks like a film which was made to take home. Some people take snapshots and slides of their trips; Agnes Varda makes a movie. One character in LION'S LOVE says, "There is no film museum in Hollywood. It is as if it is ashamed of its past." In partial atonement Varda offers a great deal of tourism and movie memorabilia. It is a combination of the new American movie nostalgia and the French fascination with capitalistic vulgarity. Unusual street signs are pointed out (the corner of Gregory and Peck), as are the main thoroughfares, the film studios, and Larry Edmunds's Cinema Bookshop. LION'S LOVE also provides some clips of early Hollywood, glossies of child stars and sex sirens, a discussion about Frank Capra's LOST HORIZON, and cameo performances by critic Carlos Clarens, critic-director Peter Bogdanovich, and exhibitor Max Laemmle. Varda's trip is trivia-oriented: for buffs only.

LION'S LOVE could be described as "stupefying dull," as Rex Reed called Warhol's CHELSEA GIRLS in the September issue of COAST FM AND FINE ARTS. Although such adjectives may describe our feelings while in the theater, they neither harm nor evaluate the film. First of all, the Warhol New Cinema is protected against such perjoratives: only the philistines are bored (to use Robert Levinson's specious argument in the same issue of FM, they attacked Bonnard, Brancusi, Braque, etc., too). And secondly, directors like Dreyer, Bresson, and Ozu have often also been described as "dull," but their value as art certainly transcends LION'S LOVE or THE CHELSEA GIRLS.

To get to the heart of LION'S LOVE and to some degree the films of Warhol, one must define that sensibility which Reed calls "dull," or which Varda herself would describe

as "cold." The idea of the cold film is simply that of Brecht's *verfremdungseffekt*, the alienation of the audience by the removal of conventional emotional constructs. The spectator thus alienated (or "bored") is forced to *diversify* his mind to preserve his sanity, and thereby hopefully adds himself to the artistic experience. The technique of alienation has been used in several ways, each having varying control over the spectator's movie-dreams.

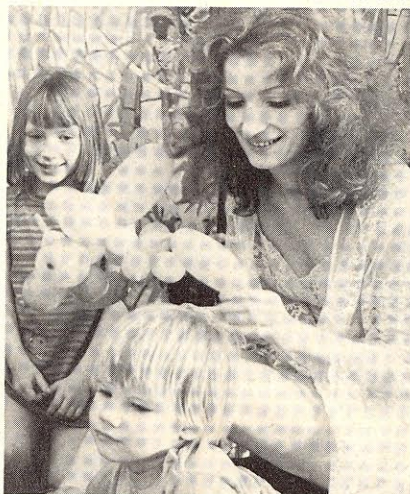
The metaphysical films of Dreyer, Bresson, and Ozu seek to completely control the spectator's diversification. They only want the spectator to do one thing: to provide by his own imagination the element they cannot offer—faith. Agnes Varda is usually associated with another school of cold film-making, the French intellectuals. Her first short, *LA POINE COURTE* (1955), was a forerunner of *LAST YEAR AT MARIENBAD*, and she has described her later feature, *LE BONHEUR*, by stating, "I had the feeling that the spectator should remain outside, a feeling of alienation . . . I wanted to make a film where the spectator does not identify himself but, instead, judges—a cold film." The films of Varda, Resnais, Marker, and Robbe-Grillet do not seek to completely control the viewer's diversification, but to stimulate it in certain directions. The desired response is intellectual, not religious. A third method of alienation—in the films of Warhol, Michael Snow and Stan Brakage—has absolutely no control over the mental diversification of the viewer. The spectator passes his time by thinking what he will, with minimal influence from the screen. To original minds this is a boon; to the rest it is boredom, and to both it makes the viewing experience redundant.

In *LION'S LOVE* Agnes Varda moves from the intellectual coldness of the French school to the dull, cold films of Warhol. Although Varda has never aspired to Bresson's asceticism, she now forfeits Resnais' intellectualism. In other words, she loses control of her audience. *LION'S LOVE* is no less cold than her early films, but

it is less effective. *LION'S LOVE* has the elements of self-parody: the alienation is still present, the spectator still walks, but the flesh beneath the visage has vanished.



Lion's Love



The self-parody of *LION'S LOVE* becomes apparent when Varda inserts "new," self-conscious devices of film-making to conceal the fact that she has lost control of her audience, that her film is becoming increasingly purposeless. But in the service of hackneyed ideas, "new" techniques are hardly new. The ironic truth is that her newness is already commercial. She shows herself directing the film on screen, but after Michael Sarne (*JOANNA*) and Haskell Wexler (*MEDIUM COOL*) have used this technique it cannot be considered anything but chic. She also uses writing on the screen to make a passing reference to the film as fiction/reality, but this cursory examination is light-years away from Robbe-Grillet. Miss Varda has incorporated the Hollywood sensibility in the serious as well as the light sections of her film—such argumentation is straight from deepest Joyce Haberland.

The "new" techniques of *LION'S LOVE* are tantamount to aesthetic blackmail—they dare us to think that the film is anything but *New* or *Important*. The boredom runs rampant and uncontrolled in *LION'S LOVE* not because Miss Varda has programmed it that way, but because her intellectual propositions are not rich enough to support anything but passing interest. At heart, *LION'S LOVE* is an uncritical restoration of dreary, PR-concocted aspects of the Hollywood myth, the celebration of great lowbrow moments in great lowbrow lives. The myth is only debunked to the degree that it is updated—replaced by everything which has the look of the new, the Pop, and the self-conscious. Unlike Marilyn Monroe, Viva knows when she is acting, but they both fulfill the same function. Varda uses Viva the same way the hacks used Monroe: to make glib generalizations about human conduct. In *LION'S LOVE*, Shirley Clark-the-actor balks at going through with the suicide Agnes Varda-the-director had planned for her, but after a brief conversation with her director Miss Clark decides to act out the suicide attempt. Varda's inclusion of the film-within-a-film technique is an unsuccessful attempt to keep Clark's melodramatic suicide from looking like the melodrama it really is.

Agnes Varda's uses of "new" techniques to perpetuate an old sensibility is at worst dull, but her malingering on the TV coverage of Robert Kennedy's assassination is offensive to those whose memories still wince at the sight of that bloody chaos. She uses the emotionally-weighted TV footage like she uses the film-within-a-film discussion, as a below-the-belt attempt to put a punch into her premise which she could not provide intellectually or emotionally.

One does not expect Agnes Varda to become any "warmer" but one does hope she will refrain from using her coldness as a camouflage. *LION'S LOVE* does not fail simply because it is dull, as Rex Reed might say, but because it uses dullness as a guise rather than as a stimulus. □