

# MOVIES PAUL SCHRADER

Czech comedy director Milos Forman is one of the great original talents of present-day cinema, a film-maker who is remaking and revitalizing our sense of the comic as surely as Godard and Resnais are changing our sense of the tragic. But because he makes comedies—and funny ones—he is rarely taken seriously.

We are very suspicious of comedy. If it fails, we denounce it mercilessly, if it succeeds, we accuse it of being easy and superficial. This predisposition against comedy may be traced back through Puritanism to Aristotle, but the lesson of Keaton, Langdon, and Preston Sturges is simple: you're lucky to be recognized even after you're dead. A director may receive great praise for his first film if it is solemn and weighty, but if it's delightful and funny, critics will take a wait-and-see attitude. Godard's "Breathless" and Resnais' "Marienbad" sent critics ga-ga, but Forman's first feature, "Black Peter," never left Czechoslovakia. His second film, "Loves of a Blond," was enthusiastically received in this country, primarily because it afforded liberals an opportunity to demonstrate their tolerance and open-mindedness toward Iron Curtain nations. It received mass media's pat-on-the-back in the condescending manner so well known to college presidents. The more serious critics accused "Loves of a Blond" of being a Czech "Marty," while the rest, equally wrong, liked it because they thought it was a Czech "Marty."

But Forman, like all film originals, has developed and copywrote a unique personal style, a style so synonymous with his theme that we cannot separate the two. We cannot view film suspense without thinking of Hitchcock, or surrealism without Bunuel, and so will we come to associate a certain type of humor with the films of Milos Forman. We do not compare artists like Eisenstein, Renoir, Bunuel to other directors. They

made the mold; the others must measure up to them. Likewise when seeking to contrast Forman's latest film, FIREMANS BALL, to other works, one can only make adequate comparisons to Forman's previous films. Using commonplace ingredients, Forman has molded an original style of director-oriented comedy.

"Firemans Ball" concerns a group of elderly small-town firemen who are presenting their annual ball. They anticipate the beauty contest in which they will select "Miss Fireman," and the presentation of a farewell gift to their 86-year old retiring president (who has terminal cancer). But none of the local girls present seem to fit their image of a Beauty Queen, and, in addition, the girls are all too timid to parade on stage before the guests. Pandemonium breaks out as the guests try to get girls—any girls—on stage. The free-for-all is interrupted by a fire. A dazed, homeless old man watches as the firemen attack his burning house with similar inefficiency. The travelling debacle returns to the dance hall where the guests decide to donate the tombola prizes to the old man—except that the prizes have all been stolen. Later, it is quiet; everyone has gone. Only the ex-president remains, waiting for his award. The firemen rush to present it to him. He opens the box to admire the gift but it too has been stolen.

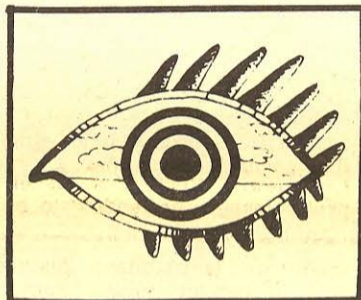
"Firemans Ball" is a showcase for Forman's unique talents. Rather than make his intentions obvious to his slow-witted antagonists, Forman has purified and rarified his craft. In "Firemans Ball" the trivial does not become didactic, but sublime. Individual scenes in previous Forman films have been called tour de forces but all of "Firemans Ball" is a tour de force. Each of his earlier films included a thirty-minute-plus dance hall scene. "Firemans Ball" is one sustained seventy-four-minute dance hall sequence. Forman is able to hold a single

scene longer than any director I can think of. In fact, the long dance hall scenes seem ideally suited to Forman's purposes. Simple people converse and complain; the music plays; another group is talking; the music returns; slowly the individual conversations come together, play off each other, and blend. Carefully, coda after chorus, Forman weaves a human symphony of small talk and simple music.

The secret of Forman's "holding power" is in the dialogue itself. People speak but communicate only accidentally. Characters cannot seem to converse in a 1:1 ratio. Each statement evokes a partial response; questions and answers overlap only peripherally. This is very similar to the sparse, tangent dialogue Harold Pinter uses. There is a definite terror in the Pinter-Forman dialogues: we feel that language can no longer effectively relate the speaker's feelings, and that we are condemned to express ourselves in nonsense. Whereas Pinter overplays his dialogue to induce tedium and a mood of nonreality, Forman throws his away to create comedy. Forman's dialogue is just as spooky as Pinter's, but it is also overtly humorous. Pinter haunts the viewer in the darkness of the theater; Forman entertains the viewer in the theater and haunts him for days to come. If you will suffer with my poor memory, I'll reproduce a bit of Forman repartee as two firemen discuss the mysterious disappearance of some tombola prizes.

1ST FIREMAN: Come here, look at this. There was a bottle of cognac setting right here. See?

2ND FIREMAN: Where is it?  
1ST FIREMAN: It's gone. That's why I called you over.



(From Page 36)

puter filmmaking here you'll just have to wait for my book to come out about six months from now. "Binary Bit" is in the book.

The only way I can describe this film is by comparing it with two other films which most readers are not likely to have seen—Norman McLaren's "Mosaic" and Stan Brakhage's animated film "The Horseman, the woman, and the moth." It resembled the McLaren film because of its archetypal mathematical precision, and the Brakhage film because of its approximation of what Stan calls "closed-eye vision," the patterns we see when our eyes are shut. Apart from that all similarities end. "Binary Bit Patterns" explores formal relationships of squadrons, tapestries and modules of polyhedral figures pulsating, transforming and multiplying with a universal logic that approaches *deja-vu*. It is the purest of kinetic-visual experiences, enhanced considerably by an extraordinary guitar-tape composition by Whitney and Charles Villiers. The images and the music are so closely related that you don't know whether you're seeing it or hearing it.

Another excellent film on the program is "Sirene," a Belgian film in which mechanical cranes and prehistoric birds inhabit a surrealistic harbor. Two films by Yoji Kuri are insanely funny as usual; Hal Barwood's "City of Xan" is beautiful to watch; Richard William's "Charge of the Light Brigade" is very nouveau and, well, each of the 19 films on the program has something going for it.

So nobody would think we—ah—drank it.

2ND FIREMAN: (pause) Where's the headcheese?

1ST FIREMAN: What do you mean headcheese?

2ND FIREMAN: There was a headcheese setting right here.

1ST FIREMAN: Wait, wait. There was a sort of ah-ah chocolate ah ball setting here. But there was no headcheese. I ought to know.

2ND FIREMAN: (pause) Then where is the chocolate ball?

1ST FIREMAN: Ah, yes. Where is the chocolate ball. Mama! Lester says there was a chocolate ball setting right here.

MAMA: What chocolate ball?

1ST FIREMAN: You know, the chocolate ball.

MAMA: There never was a chocolate ball.

1ST FIREMAN: Wait a minute. Maybe you're right Lester. You know, it was a headcheese. That's right, it was a headcheese.

2ND FIREMAN: (pause) Then where the hell is the headcheese?

And the music mercifully intervenes as one short episode yields to the next. In the symphony of the dance hall, Forman is able to build point of view as well as character. Each time characters expound and expose themselves, we see them differently. Forman will build the audience point of view in this manner: first we see a fireman as his peer would, a bit slow but a good fellow. The shot changes and we are now longing at all the firemen from the viewpoint of a young guest. Next we view the entire Firemans Ball from the outside, like the burned-out old man. Our final viewpoint is third person omniscient, like Forman's, as we watch the entire circus of human

comedy. "We," says Forman, "mercilessly spin the wheel of society which carries both old and young in its whirl, whether they like it or not, because they cannot protect themselves against it—they have neither the sense nor the strength necessary." And it is because we have known the individual so intimately that we can appreciate the pathos of omniscience.

And if the final shot of "Firemans Ball" seems very surreal and unlike comedy, it is because Forman has through laughter brought us to the same point where Polanski or Bunuel take us with suspense or shock.

Milos Forman's style is deceptively simple and forthright. We are guests at his ball, observing the sights he chooses, enlarging our scope as he determines. There are no baroque angles, no zooms, no fast pans. The basis of Forman's technique is the juxtaposition of scenes; his primary tool is the reaction shot. But let Forman speak for himself: "I am like spectator at my own film. I cannot remember technique of any film I like—my own or others. I am not impressed by quick cutting, underwater camera, Zoomar lenses. Them I understand. I am impressed by picture I am looking at and I don't know how it was done. Sometimes it is much, much more difficult to find the most simple shot that will show the unrepeatable reality that is so transitory. After all, this is the first value of the cinema. I seek the unrepeatable."

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# MOVIES

## PAUL SCHRADER

(From Page 37)

The magic serendipities of character revelation which come to other directors occasionally are the staples of Forman's art. Preparation is essential to improvisation for Milos Forman. He teaches his actors how to become amateurs, how to respond casually to a situation. "You must," Forman says, "try to draw first impressions out of people before they start to edit themselves. Each time I retell a story, less good."

Because Forman's style looks simple in execution doesn't mean it is simple in conception. Forman's style and content are hybrids between pre-existing modes. His technique is a cross between the neo-realism of the late Forties and the present-day cinema-verite. Neo-realism reenacted probable events through a precise dramatic structure. "The Bicycle Thief" sure enough looked like a slice of life, yet it adhered to the classical unities. Cinema-verite film-makers, on the other hand, seek to capture unstructured reality as it happens. Forman, using both methods, reconstructs events with the eye of an unbiased viewer. It is as if Leacock and Pennebaker were following the Bicycle Thief around Rome. By using long lenses, live sound, and casual dialogue, Forman creates the mood of cinema-verite, but by structuring, and even slowing down the events he makes the film seem like a personal creation, an artifact. While neither neo-realism nor cinema-verite have succeeded at comedy, the slightly unnatural cross between the two is hilarious.

The comedy content of "Firemans Ball" is a hybrid between Black Humor and the "jus' folks" humor of Readers Digest and "Marty." What we currently call Black Humor, stretching

from Celine to Southern, is actually exaggerated humor. The Black Humorists have pushed the basis of humor—pain—to absurdity. The assumption is that suffering in our ordinary lives can no longer humor us; we need grand grotesqueries. Yet there is protection in that shield of absurdity. It is easy to enjoy the perverse humor of "Strangelove" than "Fail Safe." It is more comfortable to believe that wars are caused by military madmen than by benign father figures like Henry Fonda who can't seem to get things straight. But it is the laughter of "Strangelove," "Candy," and "The Loved One" which are trivial when compared to "Firemans Ball." Nothing is blacker than the vision of simple, kind people, looking out for themselves and their families, trying to do a good turn for others, who are hopelessly, inexorably condemned to create only chaos and suffering. The Black Humorists are right—there is a point when the only response to horror is laughter. But if that laughter is devoid of human sentiments it is meaningless and part of the original horror itself.

Forman is well suited to the task of reviving the comic sense. Continually the victim of hardship and suppression, Forman has used humor to walk the thin line between horror and despair. Orphaned by Buchenwald and Auschwitz, having been first struck by the power of film in seeing old concentration camp newsreels, having been harassed by a police state, Milos Forman has managed to film the deepest—and funniest—comedy of the post war era. In a short about the Russian occupation of Prague being shown with "Firemans Ball" Jan Nemecek says that the people of Prague were defenseless: "All the Czechs had were reason and humor." For Milos Forman, it is enough.

## Youngbloods

(From Page 32)

brushes on cymbals) coasting in on angelic arpeggios.

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