

MOVIES

PAUL SCHRADER

A handsome man walks up a New York avenue, enters a black power bar, and says, "Are any of you niggers man enough to take me on?" So begins GREETINGS, the funniest and most contemporary American comedy since "Dr. Strangelove." This comparative judgement is less indicative of the excellence of "Greetings," than it is of the general irrelevance of American comedies. "Greetings" isn't a very great film, but it certainly is a rarity. It shines out like a gas lantern in an amphitheater.

"Greetings" is the product of a new, highly talented group of young New Yorkers. The director, Brian DePalma, is a Columbia student, the producer, Charles Hirsch, is from NYU; together they wrote the script. Robert DeNiro, Gerritt Graham, and Jonathan Warden play three carefree, draft-age students acting out a confused medley of private and public delirium.

DePalma and Hirsch made "Greetings" in two weeks for \$40,000, aiming at the new youth market. When "Greetings" first flashes on the screen, the young viewer is taken back: they really are talking about things he cares about. American comedies—even the funny ones—are notoriously behind the times, but the so-called "youth films" are not only old-fashioned, but bland and glum. At present "youth film" simply means some interloping do-gooder—old or young—has translated our lives into a succession of "Hey mans" or "Oh wows," and come out at least a decade behind the times. As any hipster knows, there are some guys who can get away with saying "Hey man" and some who can't. Brian DePalma is one who can.

"Greetings" manages to include a satirical comment on just about every cause or fad that fills the youthful mind; the draft, computer dating, shoplifting, stag films, JFK's assassination, abstract sculpture, sex positions, Vietnam, high-culture movies, and peeping toms. In other words, everything that movies usually avoid.

DePalma blends the comic styles of Godard and The Committee. Like Godard, DePalma has the courage not to move the camera, to let a scene play out its inherent humor. When a director has actors as funny as DeNiro, Graham, and Warden, he can only undercut them by showing off his directorial skill. There is a scene in "Greetings" that is as droll and perceptive as anything in Godard. As Gerritt Graham sits on a Central Park bench in the foreground listening to an earnest but befuddled artist explaining a series of photograph blowups, the focus drifts back and forth to the background where his friends are frolicking and annoying a policeman. Like The Committee "Greetings" has a cynical, no-bullshit sense of humor, like Godard it exhibits an artificial and ambiguous frame of reference, teasing the viewer with wry camera movements.

"Greetings," however, still retains the taint of a youth exploitation film. Unfortunately DePalma's excellent script and actors do not free him from more basic directorial responsibilities. Although he doesn't have to intercut like a TV editor to rescue inept performances, he is obliged to organize his

tour de forces. "Greetings" is essentially a picaresque, a collection of humorous anecdotes. He seems more interested in matching his last laugh, than building for a potentially greater and deeper form of humor. He doesn't have enough confidence in any plot line to follow it through. About thirty minutes into the film the director's hold on the audience breaks, and although the material is as funny as before, the audience is no longer knee-slapping. DePalma has failed to build a suspense and drama over a ninety-minute span. "Greetings" is like an anthology of brilliant high-school satires. This is what student films should look like, that is, if students weren't hung up on fulfilling masturbatory fantasies and achieving technical perfection.

All in all, "Greetings" does have the most hilarious scenes on American screens in many years. An all-too-familiar pudgy pornographer hawks two stag films on De Niro ("real class stuff") entitled "The Great Dane" and "The Errand Boy and the Bored Housewife." A dressed-to-the-teeth computer date asks the careless Jon Warden, "What kind of bus pulls up in front of the El Morocco?" DeNiro plays an underground film-maker who encourages his addlebrained actress to strip in the most phony, high-school thesbian manner ("Oh, I'm so tired and I've had such a hard day," she groans—and zip goes the slip).

And the Warren Report conspiracy explodes as the most delicious bubble of all. Gerritt Graham shows his dizzy girlfriend a succession of blow-ups of the Grassy Knoll, and she replies, "I saw 'Blow-Up.' I know how this turns out. It's all blurry. You can't tell anything."

Doesn't anyone want to make a good film? That question inevitably comes up when one returns to studio-made comedies. My first impression on seeing Arthur Hiller's POPI was how much better it was than the average American comedy, my second impression was to wonder why it could only come close to being good.

"Popi" was a highly contrived, yet potentially powerful plot. An impoverished Puerto Rican

widower (Alan Arkin) teaches his sons the northern geography of Cuba, and then sets them adrift in the Florida Gulf Stream. When his sons are picked up by the Coast Guard, Arkin plans, they will be adopted into a wealthy home. When the children, 12 and 9, realize the plan, they cry and do not want to leave their father, yet he pushes them out into the dark ocean. For two days they drift without water or food. Then the near-desperate Arkin hears on his transistor radio that his sons have been found near death. In a bizarrely comic scene he runs down the beach screaming for joy. Later, disguised as a reporter, he sees

his sons through a two-way mirror as they accuse their imaginary father of hating them. Shooting a contrived plot today is a very delicate operation. Contemporary audiences have come to expect a great deal more documentary structure from their films. If a director can make a contrivance plausible, he has the best of both worlds. He can achieve the grand power

and manipulability of the contrived story, and the naturalness of the documentary. If not, like Hiller, he has neither.

There are set-ups in "Popi" which are so heart-wrenching that the viewer desperately wants to believe in them—yet Hiller's direction keeps him out. By continually going for the cheap jokes in the lesser scenes, Hiller

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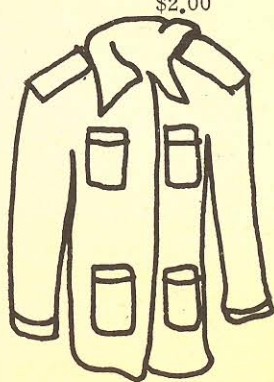
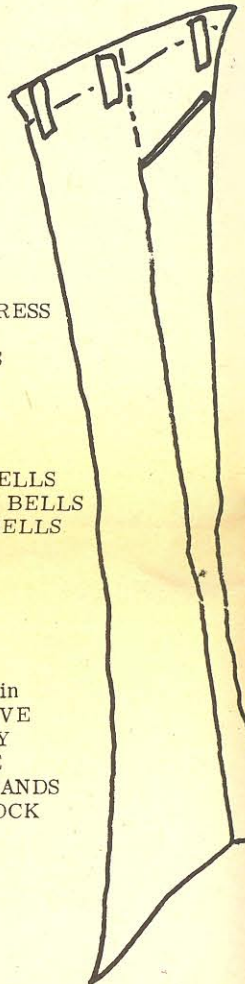
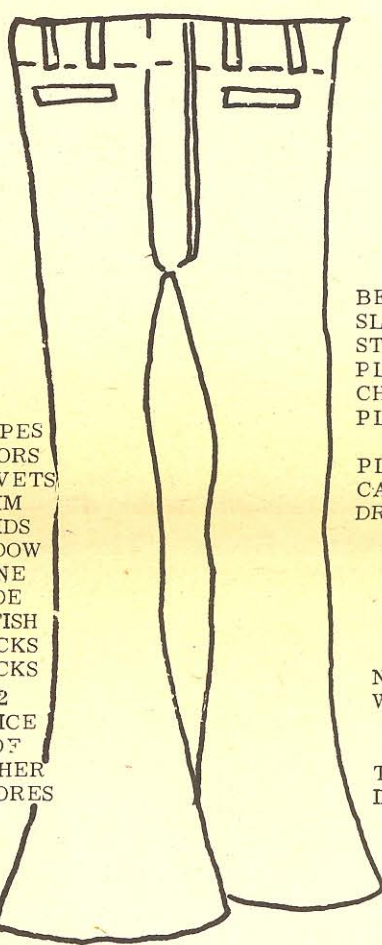
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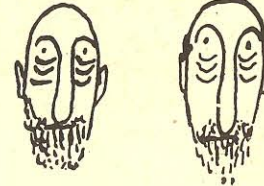
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ler castrates the effect of the great scene. Hiller's petty humor serves to emphasize the contrivance of the minor scenes, so that when a great contrivance occurs it only seems foolish and ostentatious.

In the first scene of the film Arkin bolts his Upper East Side apartment with several varieties

of locks. The audience I saw this film with—at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences—thought this was really a great laugh; this man must really be a nut to use all those locks. (And God knows five locks are not nearly enough in New York slum housing.) But the worst part was that Hiller had set them up for this cheap, even contradictory laugh. Hiller seems so insecure of his own skill that he must grasp compulsively at every bit of sniveling humor he can achieve. Like TV talk-show moderators he wants to keep the audience in yuks all the time, lest they see through him. Later in "Popi" Arkin turns on the TV set in his one-room apartment, and a phony-accented announcer comes on promoting a luxurious flight to the Bahamas. After the ad is completed, Arkin turns off the set. Hiller may as well have walked through the set with a placard.

Arkin cannot be expected to hold his scenes of tragic Grand

Guignol when his director has cheapened and uglified every laugh previous to it. One leaves the theater after "Popi" when the acute sense of loss of something great—and that sense of loss alone makes "Popi" rather exceptional in studio-made American comedies. Usually, there is nothing to lose.



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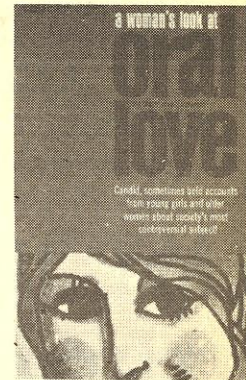
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