The Movies

LOUISE SNIDER

Social satire delivers blow

When Lina Wertmuller delivers social satire, it's a blow to the solar plexus. Don't look for subtlety in "Let's Talk About Men" (PG). The people are abrasive, and the situations stylized and extreme.

This movie is an early Wertmuller effort and a darn good one. It was produced about 10 years ago in black and white with dubbed-in English. The humor is typically outrageous.

"Let's Talk About Men" consists of four brief episodes of male-female relationships. Continuity between the dramas and comic relief are provided by the spectacle of a nude man. Nino Manfredi, who has accidentally locked himself out of his apartment. As he scurries around the apartment building, trying to find the janitor and avoid everyone else, he overhears fragments of conversation which introduce each episode.

EACH STORY has its own kind of humor ranging from irony to drunken buffoonery to the macabre. "The Knife Thrower" is a grotesquely funny story. The knife thrower's wife, acted in bubbly fashion by Milena Vukotic, is literally scarred from his attentions. She is missing an eye, a leg and her hair scalped by a bad throw.

She doesn't complain, she adores him. apologizes for everything and only asks that he clean his glasses before their next performance. The knife thrower rants that she doesn't appreciate him. After all, he reminds her, when his knife split her wooden peg leg he replaced it with a beautifully carved Chippendale leg which everyone admired.

The knife thrower is a doddering, self-serving fool. Like him, the other men in these stories are seriously flawed: one is a hypocrite, one a lecherous sadist, and one a coarse bully.

This loathsome collection of men are partnered by wives who are equally flawed. They are pampered sex-kittens or masochistic drones. If the men are morally repugnant, treating the women as objects, the women are willing accomplices in their own enslavement, or too broken in spirit to protest. The master-slave relationship, after all, tells us as much about the psychology of the slave as of the master.

Only the last tale presents a case for women's liberation. Social conditions create circumstances that completely entrap the village woman. She is the only character without a real choice. Grinding poverty and love for her children keep her toiling with no hope of reprieve.

HER LAZY husband spends his days drinking and playing cards rather than picking olives for the local grower. When other work is offered to him, he refuses because he's too busy discussing important labor issues with the other loafers in the village. They talk about joining the Communist party and organizing a general strike—then, at least, they will be gainfully unemployed.

This last story seems cut from a different cloth than the others. Here Wertmuller explores a richer, more complex theme of political issues as well as sexual confrontation. Intensification of the political and sexual themes will be brought to fruition in a later film, "Swept Away."

Overall, this is neither a feminist nor a male chauvinist picture. It explores male-female relationships and finds no redeeming qualities, no basis for equitable conduct.

The exciting thing about this movie, structurally shakey though it may be, is that Wertmuller dares to examine the fabric of our lives under a glaring light. It's an assault on convention. You either walk away repelled or laugh with Wertmuller because we are all victims of the same yoke.

GLIMPSES

NEW RELEASES

BURNT OFFERINGS (PG). Predictable plot as haunted house takes over its tenants. Betty Davis, Oliver Reed and Karen Black struggle gamely.

THE FRONT (PG). Woody Allen and excellent cast recreate the idiocy and tragedy of the blacklisting era of the 1950's.

GOD TOLD ME TO (R). Another offering of murder and the supernatural with some tech. close ups.

LET'S TALK ABOUT MEN (PG). A 10-year-old social satire by Lina Wertmuller in which she strings together four episodes dealing with men-women relationships. As usual, she manages to capture both the ugliness and the humor of her characters' bittersweet lives.

MARATHON MAN (R). A spy thriller which overwhelms a terrific cast with a surfeit of blood and violence. Laurence Olivier, Dustin Hoffman, William Devane and Roy Scheider give it their best.

A MATTER OF TIME (PG). An aged, impoverished countess, Ingrid Bergman, recalls her glamorous life and attempts to inspire a starry-eyed chambermaid, Liza Minnelli. Liza tries, but she can't cut it.

MURDER BY DEATH (PG). Wonderful spoof by Neil Simon who convenes the world's five greatest detectives to solve a murder. Among them, Peter Sellers, Alec Guinness and David Niven match wits and steal scenes, lots of puns.

NORMAN . . . IS THAT YOU? (PG). A black cast headed by Redd Foxx and Pearl Bailey star in this adaptation of the Broadway comedy. Dad brings home a six-foot hooker. Tamara Dobson, to lure his gay son into heterosexual pleasures.

OBSESSION (PG). Suspenseful romance with Cliff Robertson as a man who falls in love with a woman who looks just like his dead wife.

THE RITZ (R). All the homosexual jokes you would expect when a straight running from hit men unwittingly hides out in a gay bathhouse. Jack Weston and Rita Moreno do a good job with some lackluster material.

THE SAILOR WHO FELL FROM GRACE WITH THE SEA (R). Adaptation of a strange Japanese novel. Erotic couplings of the sailor and the widow while her psycho son secretly watches, then acts. Kris Kristofferson and Sarah Miles are the sweaty lovers.

SILENT MOVIE (PG). Mel Brooks makes a silent movie about a guy making a silent movie in 1978. Inspired jokes, sick jokes and slapstick.

BACK AGAIN

BAMBI (G). Walt Disney's gentle, lovable film. A fawn and forest life.

ESCAPE TO WITCH MOUNTAIN (G). Suspense and excitement when two children with psychic powers escape from phony uncle to seek their true origins.

SWASHBUCKLER (PG). The swords are swift and the women buxom in this pirate adventure film with Robert Shaw. The cast must have had fun making this one.

MOVIE RATING GUIDE

G General audiences admitted.
PG Parental guidance suggested. All ages admitted.
R Restricted. Adult must accompany person under 18.
X No one under 18 admitted.

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