

A Pure Formality

Giuseppe Tornatore's *A Pure Formality* (the purgatorial counterpart to his *Cinema Paradiso*) is one of the most interesting films to emerge so far this year. This has not, however, prevented some critics from praising it as an original reworking of the police interrogation scenario, while condemning its dimension of metaphysical speculation, which in fact only becomes fully apparent in the last quarter hour. And it is no doubt because the film's actual concerns are not revealed until the proverbial last-minute "twist" that some viewers object to having all their expectations (based in the conventions of the genre film apparently unfolding before them) utterly thwarted. Furthermore, the surprise ending also means that, as with Brian Singer's *The Usual Suspects*, not much of interest can be said of *A Pure Formality* without giving away the ending. Like Singer's comparably perplexing film, *A Pure Formality* centres around an interrogation scene, involving a corpulent Gerard Depardieu as Onoff, a famous and reclusive novelist who may or may not have murdered someone, and none other than Roman Polanski as a police inspector who knows Onoff's novels even better than their author does. Unlike *The Usual Suspects*, however, the central question posed by *A Pure Formality* is not "Who did it?" so much as "What did he do, and why?" After the opening gunshot, Onoff finds himself, soaking wet and bloodied, in a waterlogged provincial French police station, not at all sure what he has done to deserve this. It gradually comes to light that he has no memory of his actions. The inspector (who has no other name), arriving late, proceeds to at first cajole, and then, with increasing violence, to coerce the writer into divesting himself of a series of half-truths, contradictions, lies, and slips of memory. He makes him "un-remember" in order to remember. Onoff's credibility diminishes in indirect proportion to this progressive accumulation of bits of the recent past, and when the inspector dumps out a huge mail sack of hundreds of photos taken by Onoff at various stages of his life, we know we are looking, with Onoff, at the positive, material corollary to the life he has confessed to not having really lived. The key to the mystery is offered, but the viewer's attention is distracted by the film's almost hyperreal attention to the wet and grimy physicality of detail: the maddeningly insistent raindrops, stacks of mouldering files, a crude mousetrap, baited and waiting, even the pores on Onoff's exhausted face—everything in the police station serves to make us forget that we are watching a film that is something quite other than what it first appears to be. To dismiss the film's philosophical "musings" as merely "tacked on" is a profound misreading, for without this aspect, like it or not, there would be no film.

-Russ Kilbourn



stature, and also a means of understanding the short, unhappy life—equally eventful and tragic—of his mother, Bernadette (Anne Parillaud). His debut book becomes a bestseller: a fact he rues with irony and exasperation. Its success is due to the novelty of his being a dwarf at least as

much as his talents as a writer. But almost everyone in *Frankie Starlight* is a grotesque of some sort—damaged or abnormal to varying degrees, physically, mentally or emotionally—and there is redemption to be had in nurturing human contacts, sharing and passing on knowledge and resisting the regime of normalization. The lives of the characters are rendered mythic through the very stuff of their everyday lives and struggles. The film's masterstroke is finding plenty of the fantastic in stark, homely realism, even if Frankie does have to look, at times, through his telescope beyond the Earth to find it. Combining that with charismatically understated performances and a childlike wonderment that neither Frankie nor the film outgrows puts us almost into Terry Gilliam territory, without the aid of jaw-dropping special effects.

-Chris Wodskou

Kicking and Screaming

(Dir. Noah Baumbach)

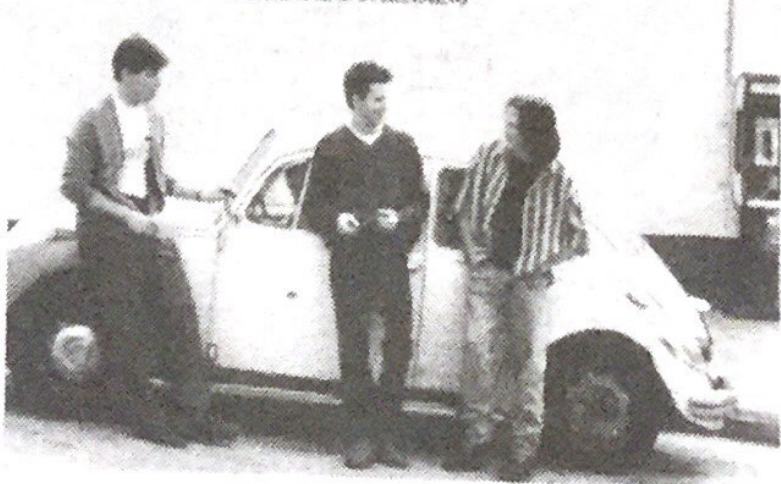
The fact that, a few years ago, Douglas Coupland wrote a slim volume with a title that really caught on is no reason to make 26-year-old Noah Baumbach's first feature suffer by comparison. As much a coming-of-age film in the grand French tradition (Godard, Truffaut, etc.) as another rambling, X-generation ensemble piece, *Kicking and Screaming* drags its characters into the light of post-graduation American college town "reality"—a relatively golden light, given the principal

characters' mutual and neurotic inability to cope with such profound change. This reality is, therefore, alternately biting and funny (as only movie/college life can be), as all four fluctuate between premature nostalgia for the very recent past and desperate denial of the larger horizons of life after exams. They keep

crawling back to the local bar and the sage advice of perennial student and bartender Chet (Eric Stoltz), who represents what they will become if they don't leave, but also stands as someone who is comfortable with himself and perfectly happy spending the rest of his life taking liberal arts courses, pouring drinks and discussing Kant's "laughability."

The film opens on graduation night, and Otis (Carlos Jacott) is paralyzed by indecision, dependency, and a complete lack of self-confidence: grad school in Milwaukee or a second interview at a video store (yes, another video store). Skippy (Jason Wiles), the least mature of the group (which isn't saying a lot), takes the easy route, re-enrolling and distractedly clinging to his girlfriend, Miami (Parker Posey, who has far too little screen-time). Max (Chris Eigeman of Whit Stillman's films) is the resident cynic. Faintly Withnaillesque, he hides his intelligence and sensitivity behind a bitingly sardonic mask, sniping at his friends while reminiscing about events before they've happened and have had time to disappoint him. The more serious side of this impulse is represented by Grover (Josh Hamilton), who regrets his failed relationship with Jane (Olivia D'Abo), a girlfriend unwilling to wait. Learning Jane has accepted a scholarship to Prague, Grover, the nascent writer, angrily mocks her choice: "You'll

"KICKING AND SCREAMING"



come back a bug." His memories of their first encounter in a creative writing class, and then getting better acquainted in Chet's bar over beer, scotch and cigarettes, constitute the emotional centre of the film and impart it with a depth belied by the fact that they met only a few months before the end of senior year.

As Noah Baumbach sees it, "If these characters were in their 40s, this would

be a sad story, but at 22, their neuroses and obsessions are more amusing. That Baumbach made a film that treats the painfully sweet memories of (recent) youth without sentimentality, with a wisdom beyond his 26 years, says something about the coming-of-age of the masculine "coming-of-age" film: it is not always necessary to have lived a whole life in order to feel the full weight of a simple choice not to follow that girl.

-Russ Kilbourn

Nobody Loves Me

(Dir. Doris Dörrie)

Nobody Loves Me, the new film by German director Doris Dörrie, turns the implicit whining of the title on its ear by asking, instead, do *you* know how to love? We are introduced to the main character, Fanny Fink, an airport guard on the verge of her 30th birthday, as she attempts, somewhat unsuccessfully, to package and sell herself on a video dating service. As much as finding a man has become her obsession, she undermines her own attempt by admitting, "I wouldn't fall in love with me if I were you." Yet we do fall in love with Fanny as she "makes friends with death" in her suicide class, where they build their own coffins for a mock funeral, and spends her days frisking women for metal objects. Her mother, a famous romance novelist, snags the boys Fanny fancies, complaining all the while about her age. Things seem pretty bleak. Then she meets Orfeo, the German-African witch doctor/con man/drag queen who lives down the hall and is coming to terms with his own impending death from what appears to be AIDS, although he denies it. She embarks upon a failed romance with their building's new yuppie manager, who is simultaneously cleaning up the building by kicking all the "undesirable" tenants out, including Orfeo. Unwilling at first, she takes him in, and he teaches her how to wear drag and exorcise herself of her ex-lovers.

Without giving the ending away, I can say that making friends with death is finally, for Fanny, about making friends with herself and the rest of the walking skeletons she meets. By the end, Fanny is able to mourn death rather than life, and love the life that death permits.

-Zoë Druick

MARGARET'S MUSEUM
(DIR. MORT RANSEN)

That it just won a total of six Genies, including three for acting and one for the screenplay, probably means *Margaret's Museum* is worth going to see. Had West Coast director Mort Ransen's most recent effort been shut out of the awards (as a couple of other deserving films were), I would still say unequivocally: go see *Margaret's Museum*. It may not change your life, but it sure as hell won't disappoint you, either. And, for those who were shocked by the Westray disaster into consciousness of disgraceful mining conditions in the Maritimes, this film will provide an indispensable historical context.

But *Margaret's Museum* is fundamentally a love story—one that played out against the bleak background of a postwar Cape Breton mining community, is clearly doomed from the start. Despite the tragedy at its centre, however, the film, like its titular heroine, Margaret MacNeil (Helena Bonham Carter), clings stubbornly to its sense of humour just as it avoids easy sentiment. Margaret, a runny-nosed, husbandless eccentric, is happy in this role, since it means she won't have to lose anyone to the "pit," as her deeply embittered mother (played superbly by Kate Nelligan) lost her husband and son before her. The mine itself, an ominous presence throughout, swallows up the town's men, yet represents for most the only means of escaping poverty.

When Margaret is finally wooed and won by giant, bagpipe-playing Neil Currie (six-foot-six Scot Clive Russell), an ex-miner with a love for music, moonshine and Gaelic, she gives her heart to him, and he, though poor, salvages enough materials (including windows from the mine office) to build a house of their own on the cliffs overlooking the bay. The house is all verticality and windows, thrusting up to the sky in blatant contrast to the dark, cramped and dangerous mine beneath. Prior to this, the interiors seem to be shot deliberately darkly, as if to prepare our eyes for the later scenes down the mine—to which Neil inevitably returns.

Bonham Carter, always good, is close to perfection in *Margaret's Museum*, which, in its convincingly gritty evocation of mid-'40s Nova Scotia, is far from Merchant-Ivory terrain. With each all-too-frequent cave-in, the siren beckons and the townspeople—mostly women—run to the minehead, their faces expressing a terrible mixture of horror and familiarity. As for Margaret (who has spent her whole life sardonically mourning), when the time comes to mourn in earnest, she is able to set about ensuring, in her own eccentric way, that no one will ever forget.

-Russ Kilbourn

thank God. Consider *Bottle Rockets*, the unabashed, bashful little Texas movie about upper class white guys who appear to have seen *Reservoir Dogs* once too often. So, with a 50-year plan scrawled in a scribbler, it's time to form a gang, right? These slackers can't even get it up to argue about trivia—though they do have cool coveralls and a great scene where they buy a handgun from precisely the sort of big-gutted NRA type who's against gun control. There's also an icky, but unpredictable love affair with a Hispanic motel maid (please!) and a great, growly James Caan, and when the crew takes on a storage depot, what with walkie-talkies not working, keys locked in the van and Caan's unexpected help, you'll never guess who ends up in the hoosegow. No you won't.

-Clint Burnham

Fargo

(Dir. Joel Coen)

The brilliant writer/director/producer team of Joel and Ethan Coen has a distinct knack for capturing the desperation of incompetence, invoking a simultaneous flinching embarrassment and kind-hearted sympathy for the plight of their characters. In *Fargo*, Jerry Lundegaard (the brilliant William H. Macy—ER's Dr.



Morgenstern) is a very ordinary car salesman in a lot of debt, who hatches a half-baked scheme to kidnap his own wife, convince his wealthy father-in-law to cough up the ransom, pay off the kidnapers and take the rest for himself. When the kidnapers (Steve Buscemi and Peter Stormare) botch the job, killing three people in the process, rural Minnesotan police chief Marge Gunderson (Frances McDormand) embarks upon her first homicide investigation. Despite the fact that the story is based on true events, it maintains the trademark Coen sense of absurdity, combining the beyond-my-control feel of their taut debut, *Blood Simple*, with the comic feel of *Raising Arizona*.

Across the board, the performances and storytelling are unexpected and subtle. McDormand combines small-town naiveté with a strong, straightforward sense of her own abilities. This, combined with the fact that she is seven months pregnant, gives her character an unsettling aura that balances strength and vulnerability. Macy's Lundegaard is filled with unwavering belief, and underlying desperation, that his plan has to work or he's fucked, it makes him both sympathetic and ridiculous. The Coen brothers artfully balance comedy with edgy, straight-ahead violence, all the more disturbing for its sudden, arbitrary nature.

Language also plays a strong role in *Fargo*. As native Minnesotans—Ethan Coen washed dishes in his youth at one of the restaurants featured in the movie—the Coen brothers have a sharp ear for local dialect, and it's played not only for rich comic tone, but also as a reminder that this isn't big city criminal activity. These are desperate small-townners looking for a way out of unpleasant situations. The Coens have consistently avoided, throughout their work, giving audiences what they expect from movies, and *Fargo* is no exception. The story isn't wrapped up in a neat package for mainstream consumption, we aren't told what to expect from each character, some plot lines are left unfinished, and key elements of the story remain untold. But rather than resulting in an unsatisfying film experience, it translates into a creepy sense of voyeurism. We're grateful for having seen a glimpse of these people's lives, to have travelled their snow-covered, lonely road with them for a while, and are left wondering what will become of them later. *Fargo* is nothing short of brilliant, practically flawless filmmaking, story-telling and character-acting from two filmmakers from whom we have come to expect nothing less.

-James Keast

Lamerica

(Dir. Gianni Amelio)

The title of *Lamerica* is only the first of many subtle ironies in this latest offering from Italy's Gianni Amelio (*Stolen Children*). Set in Albania after the fall of the Hoxha regime (the most repressive Eastern

Bloc dictatorship) *Lamerica* begins by contrasting the arrival of capitalism in the form of a pair of Italian entrepreneurs looking to exploit the economic opportunity Albania presented in 1991 and the even more triumphant advent of fascism in 1939. As Mussolini's soldiers were welcomed with open arms, so the Italian businessmen meet with only fawning wonder as they initiate plans for a shoe factory that will net them an investment grant and have little or no effect on the moribund Albanian economy—the latter indirectly, but no less starkly, evidenced by the 40,000 young, able-bodied men streaming to the shipyards, drawn by the consumer's paradise promised by Italian television. Gino (Enrico Lo Verso of *Fannelli*) is the younger partner in the scheme, assigned to settle the paperwork around their carefully selected company chairman, an aged labour camp prisoner (Carmelo Di Mazzarelli, in his first acting role): filthy, incoherent and bereft of family. What they do not realize is that their man, imprisoned after the war by the communists, believes himself to be 20 years old and in a newly liberated Italy. Soon Gino finds himself descending into the inferno of post-communist Albania, trying to find "the Chairman," who has boarded a train for a home that now only exists in his mind.

Lamerica, in fact, makes an implicit comparison between Albania in 1991 and the desperate poverty in Southern Italy after the war—a harsh historical lesson Gino must learn first-hand, presented by Amelio in harrowing, almost documentary style. More callow and selfish than corrupt, Gino is divested of his Western clothes and car, forced by circumstances to undertake the same journey to Tirana's port that he knows the young men and families are making in vain. And as his own journey progresses, the sycophantic attitude of the Albanians melts away. The hardship and cruelty Gino and the Chairman meet with, however, are mitigated by small acts of grace; unasked, people with nothing make tiny sacrifices on a stranger's behalf. Just when *Lamerica* looks like it will end

as a poignant allegory for the oppressed and benighted throughout history, making their way to a new life in a new land, a remarkable thing happens: the Albanians turn and look directly into Amelio's camera, the hope and determination in their eyes and faces standing for nothing but what they are.

-Russ Kilbourn

Man of the Year

(Dir. Dirk Shafer)

If the name Dirk Shafer is familiar to you, it's probably because you're a fan of *Playgirl* (and who isn't?). You might recall that he was *Playgirl*'s 1992 "Centerfold of the Year." His duties for the year included going on a date with a lucky reader, and appearing on daytime talk shows to have his butt ranked and to disclose what women want from studs such as himself. However, the publicity for the film is organized around the "twist" that Dirk is (gasp) gay and "has no clue what women want at all." There are at least two major flaws with this angle: 1) Men—straight or gay—do not know what women want because 2) "women" is a group comprised of such diversity that it becomes an almost meaningless category. In order to explore the somewhat inane paradox of a gay Man of the Year, Dirk and his friends have recreated his year of fame in a pseudo-documentary written and directed by the centerfold himself. This includes interviews with his family and friends, as well as actors intercut with actual videotaped episodes of Dirk on TV and montages of his modeling portfolio. The laughable "storyline" mostly concerns the tensions between Dirk and his boyfriend, whom he cannot acknowledge publicly for fear of losing his job. To that end, several humourless Act Out members (carefully signified with matching T-shirts and bitchy remarks) slink through the movie, threatening to bring the straight-looking Dirk out of the closet.

In his insistence that he is gay and proud, despite his foray into soft porn for women (although avidly perused by men as well), most of the humour in the film comes at the expense of women. Women are represented by the pathetic winner of the date with Dirk who tries desperately to bed the model; the astrology-obsessed exotic dancer who becomes a rabid fan and refuses to believe he is gay; the overbearing, gum-cracking publicist for *Playgirl*; and the hideously over-made-up woman Dirk works for as dance teacher or personal trainer. In the final analysis, *Man of the Year* is blatantly self-promotional, as Dirk, who we learn has always wanted to be a successful performer, is finally breaking into showbiz by (ta-da) creating a film about himself: the man behind the image, if you will. Appositely, perhaps, there is nothing in *Man of the Year* that lends that elusive third dimension to the coverboy. His best strategy for success would be to keep his mouth shut—pouts are easier that way.

-Zoë Druck