

# FILM REVIEWS

## George Kaczender's IN PRAISE OF OLDER WOMEN

d. George Kaczender, sc. Paul Gottlieb, adapt. Adapted from a Stephen Vizinczey novel, ph. Miklos Lente, l.p. Karen Black, Tom Berenger, Susan Strasberg, Alexandra Stewart, Marilyn Lightstone, Helen Shaver, Louise Marleau, Marianne McIsaac, Monique Lepage, Helen Shaver, Susan Watson, exec. p. Stephen J. Roth, & Harold Greenberg, p. Robert Lantos & Claude Héroux, assoc. p. Howard R. Lipson, p.c. Astral Bellevue Pathé & R.S.L. Productions, 1977. 35mm, running time 120 minutes, dist. Astral Films



Tom Berenger as András gets lit by a Hungarian torch singer

Stephen Vizinczey's memoir *In Praise of Older Women* has sold two million copies since its publication in 1965. The *New York Times* hailed it as "refreshing, individual — a post-pornographic book." Canada's leading literary critic, Northrop Frye, described it as being "written with great lucidity and charm." The most commonly recurring word in the book's reviews was "elegant": "Elegantly entertaining," said *The Times* of London. "Elegant, exact and melodious," said *The Sunday Telegraph*. "Elegantly erotic" said *Punch*. What impressed these reviewers was Vizinczey's ability to blend sensuality with wit, carnality with intelligence; in short — lust with taste.

Vizinczey's book is a delightful entertainment in which he describes the erotic adventures of his surrogate-self, András Vajda, from age 10 in Hungary, to age 30, by which time he has immigrated to Canada and accepted a teaching post in Saskatoon. The book is lyrical about Hungary, satirical about Canada; reverent about sex, dilettantish about politics. Its 185 pages can be breezily read in a couple of hours, making it the ideal kind of

light reading for travellers beset with interruptions and distractions or people with more permanently restive attention-spans. It is too slight a work however to be regarded as a minor classic, even as erotica; Vajda-Vizinczey has curiously naive attitudes for a libertine: he describes a lesbian as having "strong male drives;" homosexuals are invariably "unmanly;" he tends to view any sexual act other than intercourse with disdain. *In Praise of Older Women* is not the troubling work of a sexual revolutionary; simply a little night music composed by a middleclass "swinger."

The appeal of the book to producer Robert Lantos, director George Kaczender, scriptwriter Paul Gottlieb, cinematographer Miklos Lente, among others responsible for the film version is understandable: each is an Hungarian emigré, for whom the story clearly strikes a strong emotional chord. Besides, given the popularity of the book and the saleability of the theme (Vajda is an upbeat, "sensitive" Alfie, a Casanova without machismo) a film version looks like a wise commercial investment. On the strength of its cast

(Karen Black, Susan Strasberg, Helen Shaver, Marilyn Lightstone, and Tom Berenger, from *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*, as Vajda), and a slick advertising campaign, *In Praise of Older Women* may be the singular Canadian hit of the fall-winter season — but not, I expect, if word-of-mouth gets around fast.

There were basically two ways to proceed in adapting the novel: the mentally-easy and obvious course would have been to make a glossy, grade A, porno-film, for Vizinczey's memoir is sexually explicit, and its structure is that of most erotica; whenever the author feels that a reader's interest may be lagging, he changes partners and a new round of seductive intrigue begins. The book has nothing on its mind (despite a pretentious epilogue about "the meaning of sex" that would not get more than a C plus in a philosophy course) except orgasms. The problem with following this route is that — being Canadians — even if we did make porno films we probably couldn't muster the élan of the Swedish or the French; the hard-core market is wildly unreliable with most pro-

vinces and states in such a bewildering condition of ambivalence, enforcing laws based on such arbitrary standards, that a direct and honest translation of book-into-film was not considered practical. The problem which Kaczender and Gotlieb faced was one of cultural lag and confusion. In 1978, it is permissible (even in Ontario) to write and publish sexually explicit material; but a photograph of the same acts runs a high risk of prosecution. What in one medium is now considered conventional, is in another (even when restricted to an adult audience) considered outrageous. When a book becomes famous, due in great part to its sexual candor, and filmmakers become tempted to cash in on the success but also feel obliged to delete the sex or reduce it to head-and-shoulder couplings or "artfully" choreographed scenes in which a shadow, a bedpost or strategically-placed vase of roses means the difference between an "R" and an "X," what emerges is a hypocritical hodgepodge — a film that talks out of both sides of its mouth — a sniggering yes, and a cowardly no.

The alternative to that dilemma is to alter the book significantly and deliberately in an altogether different direction. When Stanley Kubrick made *Lolita* he recognized two limitations — one in himself (he has no aptitude for depicting sensuality, beyond his highly-developed sense of visual beauty) and the other in society (erotic interplay between a 12-year-old girl and a middle-aged man would not have been permitted in a film in 1963, or even in 1978 given the legal difficulties of Louis Malle's *Pretty Baby*). Normally those limitations would disqualify anyone from adapting *Lolita*, but Kubrick's gamble was that one could produce an "interpretation" of the book, substituting a new kind or pleasure — brilliantly sly satire — for the one that had made the novel notorious. Whether he succeeded or not is open to debate (he occasionally has expressed the wish to try it again, for the film is clearly compromised by moral attitudes of the time) but it is still an option for filmmakers caught in the crevice between avant-garde literature and rear-guard cinema. Following this method of adapting *In Praise of Older*

*Women* the director should have regarded as his models such European films as *Loves of a Blonde* or *Closely Watched Trains* — that is, drawing upon his knowledge of Hungary, and the experience of dislocation in being an immigrant, given us a film that concentrates on well-drawn characters, and a sense of time-and-place that one can almost taste and smell in its palpability.

Kaczender's past films (*Don't Let the Angels Fall*, and *U-Turn*) seemed emotionally flat and uninvolved — which I attributed to the slightness of their scenarios. This time, with a better range of material, the effect is roughly the same — one watches with polite, rather than rapt, attention. And this time my conclusion is harsher: I don't think Kaczender knows how to "hook" an audience. His films look good (in a tv-commercial way) but they are unengaging on any other level.

The novel, slight though it is, maintained a keen sense of irony which the film lacks; space permits only one telling example. Vizinczey depicts an encounter between Vajda and a young actress named Mici. She leads him on, and agrees to go back to his room, then has a sudden change-of-mind and begins worrying if she'll get pregnant. Of her own accord she offers to have sex the "safe" way — orally — ("Well, you want me to do it or not?" she asks; "I wouldn't dream of inconveniencing you," András replies) but given András' attitudes to oral sex he doesn't find deliverance. ("We made love in the French way," he says. "We both came but it didn't help me, my headache only grew worse. Mici was completely satisfied. It was the culmination of her chaste dreams, I suppose: the mysterious immaculate conception.") In the film, Gottlieb and Kaczender show András picking up a young cabaret singer (who does a lusty song-and-dance routine that enflames András's imagination) only to have her turn out, somewhat incongruously, to be merely a "cock-teaser." András goes home, without any sex, complaining bitterly about the fickleness and lack of sophistication of young girls. Frequently throughout the film one finds the novel being

cheapened and coarsened, made into stereotypical situations. Other chapters of the novel, such as one showing Vajda's rather heartless affair with an impoverished mother-of-two, are left out altogether. The end result is a fuzzy and trivial film about a man who never grows up, and who is never forced to take anything seriously.

With the exception of Helen Shaver, normally a fine actress, but here confined to an embarrassingly silly caricature of a North American faculty-wife, most of the cast give creditable performances (especially Karen Black) but they all deserve something better. What in Vizinczey was sensual, witty and elegant is — via Kaczender — rendered merely smutty, cute and photogenic. One may forgive *In Praise of Older Women* for its sexual cowardice, but there is little excuse for its mediocrity.

John Hofsess

## Robin Spry's DRYING UP THE STREETS

d. Robin Spry, sc. B.A. Cameron, ph. Ken Gregg, ed. Myrtel Virgo, l.p. Len Cariou, Don Francks, Kelvin Butler, August Schellenberg, Jacques Hubert, exec. p. Ralph L. Thomas, p.c. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (Radio-Canada) 1977, col 16mm, running time 90 minutes.

This is not the "great" film followers of Spry's career have been expecting.

Nevertheless, it is well worth seeing for its uncompromising depiction of the sordid subterranean world of hard drug pushers and junkies, of anxious-to-please pimps and the girls they exploit: the runaways who are lead into drug addiction then forced to pay for