

Escape from Escapism: Bob Fosse and the Hollywood Renaissance

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Amid the widely acknowledged youth boom of the New Hollywood, a trio of men in their forties broke through as film directors. Robert Altman labored in the 1950s and 1960s directing television episodes; Hal Ashby worked his way up as a film editor. Bob Fosse (1927-87) was immersed in dance, vaudeville, and musical theatre, but above all a devotion to cinema.

Fosse was an electrifying dancer in his youth, as evidenced by his few film appearances as an MGM contract player. But MGM only wanted to turn him into “the next Gene Kelly,” as can be seen in one of his movies, *Give a Girl a Break* (1953). The studio system was crumbling, and there would be no “next Gene Kelly.” Fosse broke his contract after a year. His career breakthrough occurred on Broadway, courtesy of Hollywood. Producer-director George Abbott saw *Kiss Me Kate*, which included a spectacular extra-narrative 45-second dance at the end of the film that Fosse was permitted to choreograph and perform. Abbott hired Fosse to choreograph his latest musical, *The Pajama Game* (1954). The sensational “Steam Heat” number introduced the Fosse style, derby hats, movements down and in rather than up and out, and finger snaps and jazz hands. Choreography on Abbott’s *Damn Yankees* (1955) teamed him with Gwen Verdon, the play’s star, and eventually his third wife, muse, and professional partner.

Broadway was his lifeblood for the next dozen years. His choreography for the back-to-back film versions of *Pajama Game* (1957) and *Damn Yankees* (1958), would be his only forays to Hollywood during this period. By 1969, when the 41-year-old Fosse directed his first film, the adaptation of his 1966 show, *Sweet Charity*, he owned five Tony Awards for Best Choreography

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and had been nominated three times for Best Director. The film's star, Shirley MacLaine, started as a dancer in *Pajama Game*, and pushed Universal, which bought the film rights, to hire him to direct.

Charity got lost in the musical roadshow glut of the late-1960s. After its failure, Fosse turned down offers to direct Broadway shows. He resolved that he was a film director, and vowed not to go back to the stage until he proved it. *Cabaret* (1972) overturned nearly all the conventions that had doomed the film musical in the 1960s. It introduced a realistic style to a genre which, previously, could not get past its family-friendly frivolity. *Cabaret* proved that Bob Fosse was a film director.

About Bob Fosse as New Hollywood auteur, however, much remains to be proved. In his own time, however, recognition of his vision and creativity as a film artist were widespread. Fosse is the only person to win—or even be nominated for—an Academy Award (for *Cabaret*), a Tony (*Pippin*), and an Emmy (*Liza with a Z*)—all in the same season, and all as Best Director. Fosse's dazzling “triple crown” of 1972-73 may blind film scholars to the importance of what he accomplished in *Cabaret*. For most of its history, the film musical, a genre born with the sound film, had married popular music, dance and romantic comedy to striking mise-en-scene and camera movement. In *Cabaret* Fosse reinvented the musical as a conceptual montage form; the film's visual and sound juxtapositions brought Fosse closer to Sergei Eisenstein's concepts of conflict in editing than to Vincente Minnelli's lush mise-en-scene-based approach to musicals. Each Fosse film is more defined by editing than the last. In 2012, when the Motion Picture Editors Guild asked its members to vote for the 75 best-edited films of all time, “considered in terms of picture and sound editorial as opposed to just the former,” *All That Jazz* ranked fourth.¹ *Cabaret*, came in 30th.

Overall, however, Fosse is rarely recognized as part of the Hollywood Renaissance. His film directing is seldom acknowledged as being on the same level as his contributions to dance and the Broadway musical. Two of his films are musicals, two are biopics, and one, *All That Jazz*, is both, a musical film à clef. “Musicals have the auteur strike against them going out of the gate,” writes Nick Barrios. “The directors who really took off in musicals,” such as Fosse, “do not always earn the respect of the serious-minded, never mind that they usually should” (9).

There is the ongoing debate over what constitutes a Hollywood Renaissance auteur. Like most of the widely acknowledged New Hollywood directors, Fosse made revisionist genre movies, and was intoxicated with cinephilia, especially postwar European art cinema. The cinematographers on his two films, *All That Jazz* and *Star 80*, were Guiseppe Rotunno and Sven Nykvist, veterans of films by Federico Fellini and Ingmar Bergman, respectively. Fosse directed only five movies, but an output consisting of a handful of films does not keep Sergei Eisenstein, Jean Vigo, Jacques Tati or Sergio Leone from casting a giant shadow, and should not obscure Fosse’s contributions to cinema either.

Sweet Charity tries to be several contradictory things: a touching adult story, and an avant-garde, but expensive family musical. One sees an inventive director tangled in his own web of conventions. As a stage show, *Sweet Charity*, which Fosse conceived for Verdon, was the first musical comedy based on a European art film, Federico Fellini’s *Notti di Cabiria* (*Nights of Cabiria*) (1957). Played by Giulietta Masina, Fellini’s wife and muse, Cabiria is more a female version of Chaplin’s Little Tramp than a realistic prostitute. Cabiria walks the streets, but never seems to meet a john. Fosse’s interest in the sleazy underbelly of showbiz feeds *Sweet Charity*, as it would compose fundamentally the subjects of all his later shows and films. His research

took him to the seedy dance halls of Times Square where he saw “dance hostesses available in every flavor, some sixteen, some forty-two, . . . none with talent” (Wasson 197).

While the ambiguity and formal discontinuity of art cinema fascinated Fosse, he chose a work that would not essentially disrupt the whimsy and escapism of musical comedy. Thus Charity drifts aloof from the other hardened dance hall girls—she’s absent from the “Hey, Big Spender” number in which the taxi dancers offer up themselves for the dispiriting prospect of making a living.

The movie’s Charity Hope Valentine (MacLaine), like Cabiria, tags along behind a glamorous male movie star (Ricardo Montalban) who treats her like one of his fans. She follows a religious procession (“The Rhythm of Life,” sung by Sammy Davis Jr., in a prime example of the “guest star” appearance in the late musical roadshow cycle). Charity falls in love with a dubious Mr. Right (John McMartin), a neurotic type from the pen of the prolific Neil Simon, who was brought in to “save” a book drafted by Ro(bert Louis) Fosse and a young, (uncredited) writer, Martin Charnin. The failure of *Sweet Charity* on film can be attributed to a number of decisions that track back to the Broadway original. There the combination of Fosse’s razzle-dazzle and the charm and electric talent of Verdon, covered over a narrative that was episodic and, away from Fellini’s magic (neo-) realism, rather aimless.

This is where the star performance in the film of *Sweet Charity* takes on a sense of ventriloquism. Hollywood continually gave Shirley MacLaine in her peak star years roles as prostitutes (*Irma La Douce*, *Two Mules for Sister Sara*) and waifish victims (*Some Came Running*, *The Apartment*). Charity Hope Valentine would seem in her wheelhouse. However, she was conceived for and developed by Verdon, perhaps the greatest female dancing and comedy actress of Broadway in its Golden Age. If Verdon were having her career now, she probably

would be in demand for voice work; if Pixar needed to find, say, Dory's sister, Verdon's vocals, expressively warm and scrunchy, might fill the gills. As heard on *Sweet Charity*'s original cast album, Verdon makes a line like "Wow. This place sure is crawling with celebrities. I'm the only person in here I never heard of," funny and adorable. Spoken on film by a world-famous movie star, however, the line is jarring, pulling the film out of itself for a moment. In Fosse's film the handsome movie star in New York takes Charity to a Romanesque night club where precision Fosse dancers perform a "radical chic" conception of "groovy" dance moves. With lead dancer Suzanne Charney and a pre-stardom Ben Vereen in the dance platoon, the number gives American cinema its first look since the mid-1950s at full-out Fosse choreography, and in Panavision and Technicolor yet. The "Rich Man's Frug" serves the generic purpose of spectacle for this 1960s roadshow. The number detaches from the narrative and its protagonist, however, for five-and-a-half minutes. This is typical of the way the film's highlights, some of the most impressive in musicals, also point out its problems, particularly of point of view. Are we in Charity's mind, or observing her from a distance?

With cinematographer Robert Surtees, a versatile artist who was capable of shooting *The Graduate* and *Doctor Dolittle* in the same year, *Charity* shows none of the dull, pale gloss of Universal movies in the sixties, an achievement in itself. The staging and cutting of MacLaine's "If My Friends Could See Me Now," with jump cuts matched to dance moves, mark the first opportunity to see Fosse at play with the affinities of dance and film editing. He explores these with far more success, in *Cabaret*, *Lenny*, and *All That Jazz*.

Cabaret is a disciplined film, hard as agate and black as onyx, with a tight narrative line punctuated by songs that parallel and comment upon the action. All the numbers, with one highly justified exception, are performed on the dinky, grimy stage of the fictional Kit Kat Klub in

Berlin. *Cabaret* subverts its genre as thoroughly as *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* unravels the Western or *Chinatown* undoes the film noir. Perhaps because it stands as a star-making vehicle for Judy Garland's daughter—its one bow to genre tradition--*Cabaret* has never been accorded its due as a Hollywood Renaissance musical. Fosse took the show, with its score by John Kander and Fred Ebb, and shook it until almost nothing was left of film musical conventions observed since the genre began. Without the look of repugnant razzle-dazzle he designed with British cinematographer Geoffrey Unsworth and West German production designer Rolf Zehetbauer, and a firm refusal of the candy-box Freed Unit luster that producer Cy Feuer is said to have favored, *Cabaret* might well be one more item in the dustbin of film musicals, rather than a film that needs to be understood in the context of the Hollywood Renaissance. ²

Some decisions, such as the elimination of most of the plot from playwright Joe Masteroff's and director Harold Prince's 1966 Broadway musical, and the retrieval of alternative stories from the original source, *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939) by Christopher Isherwood, were made before a director was hired. Jay Presson Allen wrote a first draft script that scuttled the show's secondary plot concerning Frau Schneider and her aborted romance with a Jewish fruit vendor, and opted for a youth-film emphasis, with Liza Minnelli attached. Sally Bowles, based upon a 19-year-old runaway English heiress named Jean Ross whom Isherwood met in Berlin, would be American for the first and, to date, only time in a major production of *Cabaret*. "Christopher," Isherwood's avatar, was renamed Brian Roberts (Michael York) and once again became an Englishman (In the show he is a writer from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania).

In their first scene together Sally tells Brian "I do think one ought to go to the man's room if one can. I mean it doesn't look so much as if one expected it. Does it?" Far from the affected Sally of most of the other versions, Minnelli's Sally speaks with a confidence associated

with masculinity, coming down on the ends of sentences, rather than going up tentatively. Kander and Ebb's new song, "Mein Herr," is in the "Ramblin' Man," "Don't Fence Me In" genre of song traditionally sung by a male singer.

The fragmentation and vamping of the end of the song's introduction is matched by Fosse's editorial cubism, the dancers' bodies draped backwards over chairs, a physical movement on each cut. The severe, mechanical movements of the expressionless dancers—starkly different from the smiling hyperkineticism of conventional show biz numbers--makes the cramped square stage evoke the chokehold Germany feels from the Nazis, taking it in as entertainment. *Cabaret* is not organic; the songs don't grow out of the story, or do they? It might be more accurate to say that the story grows out of the songs. Kander and Ebb's score creates incisively the plot and characters. For example, after meeting Max, there is a sudden close-up of Sally and an eyeline match to Max's Rolls Royce. Cut, again, to Sally, backstage applying makeup, and intoning "Money," then to the Emcee on stage in close-up repeating "Money," and then, in a jump cut, to their comic cabaret duet, "Money Makes the World Go 'Round." This is a modernist show musical. The plot could move forward without the number, but the song instantly burlesques Sally's attraction to Max as the shallowest materialism. The film's only mature love may be that which transpires between Max and Brian, with Sally in the *Suddenly Last Summer* role of the woman who brings closeted gay men together. Fosse wrote in notes on the script, however, that Max, the film's representative of the decadent German aristocracy that profits from the country's social, moral, and political collapse,³ "dumps them" because "he's already gotten what he wants" (*Cabaret*, Box 16B).

There are no establishing shots showing the Klub from the outside. The Emcee's opening spiel contrasts "inside" with "outside," as if the outer edifice of the cabaret were Germany itself.

The Emcee, in Fosse's conception, is a burlesque Mephistopheles, delivering his audience to the Nazis while inviting them to forget their troubles, a devilish reconception of songs like "Get Happy," which Garland sang in her films. In the way that other film genres examined their assumptions amid the Hollywood Renaissance, so *Cabaret* can be considered an anti-musical, systematically demolishing the genre's nostalgia for the past by inducing the spectator to imagine the future for its characters. For instance, the marriage of Fritz and the Jewish heiress Natalia, which can take place once he confesses to her that he has been a Jew trying to pass for Gentile, is chillingly poignant here, since we know what horrors this couple will face together.

The cabaret debases women and reduces human values to brutalism. Early in the film, the cabaret manager ejects a Nazi leafleteer, while on the stage the Emcee sprays water onto female mud wrestlers. As the audience howls, the Emcee smears a Hitler moustache in mud onto his upper lip and thrusts out his right arm. The manager, smiles weakly, nervously loosening his collar. The triumph of the Nazis foretold by these gestures soon plays out. Sally stands underneath an elevated train, instructing Brian on how to release tension by screaming just as the train passes. On Sally's cue, "Now!," Fosse cuts to the beating of the manager by Nazi thugs, intercut onstage with the Emcee and five female dancers clad in traditional lederhosen performing a "slap dance," seeming to match the two events. Much later, the killing of Natalia Landauer's little dog by a Nazi mob chanting "*Juden*," is parallel-edited with dancers doing a "Tiller-style" precision dance. As Nazi goons jump over the Landauer fence, and Natalia discovers her murdered pet, Fosse cross-cuts with the dancers, whose headwear has been transformed into combat helmets, and the Tiller dance has become the goosestepping of storm troopers, led by the Emcee in drag. Thus are dehumanization and indoctrination disguised as burlesque, with the cabaret entertainment becoming the soundtrack of real-life violence.

The “folk musical,” one of Rick Altman’s subcategories for the genre, has great faith in the people. When the common people sing a song in *Cabaret*, however, it isn’t “Edelweiss”; it’s “Tomorrow Belongs to Me.” When the common people speak in *Cabaret*, they spread poison, not folk concepts such as optimism and the promise of the future. The number, moreover, is documentary-style, sung by total strangers to us, ordinary folk, and led by a young man who, we realize, represents the Aryan ideal. The scene is even shot in the style of Leni Riefenstahl, with low angles that draw us in and then overwhelm us.

After failing to become “Bob Fosse, Cinematic Auteur” in his own property, he needed to go outside himself in one way, to find the film artist he was. Following *Cabaret*’s triumph and the Triple Crown that set him atop the show business world, Fosse was now a seventies auteur. The films *Sweet Charity* and *Cabaret* were projects that others launched and Fosse joined. The three films that ensued were conceived by Fosse, then shepherded through the process with producers and studios who believed in him. Increasingly, he put his personal stamp on his films, co-writing *All That Jazz* and then solely scripting *Star 80*.

Lenny marks a departure from the musical genre, but not from Fosse’s fascination with lowdown showbiz milieux. Dustin Hoffman plays the beatnik comedian Lenny Bruce (1925-1966), known for his iconoclastic satires of racial, sexual, and religious hypocrisies. As tightly assembled a film as *Cabaret*, *Lenny* is nonetheless denser, less a chronicle of Bruce’s life than a film essay about the comic and his effect on the culture and those who knew him. Only ten years after a relentless series of obscenity arrests crushed Bruce’s career, comedy bits that Bruce was arrested for performing in front of consenting audiences in small venues late at night could be projected with no objections over movie theater speakers around the world, in an R-rated prestige film released by a major Hollywood studio.

With *Lenny*, Fosse leads the conversion of the biopic from a producer's showpiece to an auteur's means of expression. Fosse's identification with his subject is made obvious. Fosse, a Norwegian-American in a largely Jewish business (his closest friends were well-known Jewish writers, Paddy Chayevsky, Herb Gardner, and Neil Simon), explores the life and times of a comic who displayed his Judaism openly. No comedian before Bruce wove Yiddish so thoroughly through his act; the more conservative Chayevsky blasted Bruce, as well as Julian Barry's play, on which the film is based, as "helpful to the anti-Semite" (Gottfried 265). The film pivots around an unseen interviewer who is heard questioning three subjects, Bruce's mother, Sally Marr (Jan Miner), his manager, a fictional character played by Stanley Beck, and his ex-wife, Honey (Valerie Perrine). Fosse himself is heard as the interviewer, as well as seen out of focus, in corners of the frame, thus insinuating himself into the infrastructure of his film. One of the few post-1966 films made in black-and-white, *Lenny* marks the only time Fosse ever worked in the format, not counting a few early-TV segments. The film cuts among three distinct black-and-white modes as rendered by cinematographer Bruce (son of Robert) Surtees: brilliant high-contrast for scenes showing Lenny's nightclub act; low-contrast documentarian photography of the sort that Wheeler Winston Dixon characterizes as "drab" for the interviews, and for the flashbacks to Lenny's day-to-day life, the melodramatic noir look familiar from films such as *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957) and *I Want to Live!* (1958).

Brilliantly edited though *Cabaret* is, it was on *Lenny* that Fosse learned that the cutting room is where a movie really learns to dance. With Alan Heim, whom he met on *Liza with a Z* and who remained his film editor for the remainder of his career, Fosse creates a biopic in the form of the dialectical montage mosaic. *Lenny* wants to be, like *Citizen Kane*, a critical investigation and atomization of its subject. In the film's first half, Honey tells the interviewer

about her courtship and marriage to Bruce, to the extent where their six-year marriage, which ended shortly before Bruce rose from raw young comic in low-class dives and striptease joints like those where Fosse started, to standup beatnik icon to, finally, the object of legal censorship battles around the U.S., over what was still called in the early-1960s, “public indecency.” The Lenny-Honey marriage takes on more significance that it may have actually had, bearing a noticeable similarities to the Bob-Gwen relationship. Lenny’s standup monologues function in a way similar to the Kit Kat Klub songs in *Cabaret*, the stage soundtrack often overtaking the dramatic mise-en-scene. The film’s second half covers the rise to fame with which biopics are conventionally concerned.

This is perhaps the only biopic ever filmed that doesn’t end with a validation of the subject. No one emerges to testify to Bruce’s lasting contribution to comedy; no homage is paid to Bruce as a fighter for the First Amendment. *Lenny*, like *All That Jazz* and *Star 80*, ends with a blunt shot of the subject’s corpse (So does *Cabaret*, if one counts the deadly state, literally, to which the Kit Kat Klub delivers Germany after conditioning it to be a culture that condones genocide.) The reviews by Kael and Vincent Canby stressed the film’s supposed resemblance to the “suffering artist” hagiographic biopics of the studio era, selling extremely short Fosse’s innovative biographical montage. Ultimately, however, it is true that *Lenny* cannot move past the limitations of the warts-and-all subgenre, itself the product of the compromise of postwar cinematic realism with hagiography. Warts-and-all had been since the 1950s the genre’s dominant biopic story type, especially in entertainer and sports biographies.⁴ Despite its formal originality and brilliance, *Lenny* averts its gaze from some of Bruce’s self-destructive behavior, especially the epic drug addiction that might have taken him down and brought on an early death, even without all the censorship of his act.

After *Lenny*, Fosse put a screenwriter, Robert Alan Aurthur, to work on a film version of the 1974 novel, *Ending*, by Hilma Wolitzer. *Ending* is about a young woman whose husband is dying of multiple myeloma. Fosse, as he dramatizes in *All That Jazz*, experienced his own brushes with death. He suffered two heart attacks while juggling *Lenny*'s final editing with the start of rehearsals for *Chicago*. After emerging from the hospital and mounting *Chicago*, whose opening was delayed from January to June 1975, and interviewing numerous doctors and specialists on death, Fosse began to eclipse *Ending* with thoughts of an autobiographical docu-comedy and surrealistic musical, based upon the events surrounding his own heart attacks in the fall of 1974.

Fosse and Aurthur interviewed everyone who had been in Fosse's orbit at the time, casting many of them in the film. Dancer Ann Reinking essentially plays herself, as do film editor Alan Heim, dancer Kathryn Doby as Joe Gideon's assistant choreographer, and actress-turned-journalist Chris Chase as the TV reviewer who pans *The Standup*. A number of actors important to Fosse, among them Ben Vereen from *Pippin*, play prominent roles here. Cliff Gorman, who played the title character in *Lenny* on Broadway, gets to play a close facsimile of Lenny Bruce here. Gwen Verdon is played by stage actress Leland Palmer. Fosse and Verdon never were divorced, though she separated from him due to his countless affairs. They were lifelong partners professionally; he actually died in her arms outside the National Theater in Washington, D.C., on the opening night of a new *Sweet Charity* revival. When I, a Ph.D. student, heard that Fosse died, my sick-joke response was that I'd seen that movie already. Lenny Bruce couldn't have said it better. Verdon lived to oversee the curation of both their papers for the Library of Congress.

Fosse appears to have adhered to the creative writing axiom: “When writing about someone else, pretend you’re that person. When writing about yourself, pretend it’s somebody else.” This allows him to be somewhat honest, turning himself into an anti-hero, with the tough-tender Roy Scheider cast against type as Gideon/Fosse.

Burlesque finds its way into much of the film. The movie producer of “The Standup,” as *Lenny* is retitled, is relentlessly caricatured; so is the trio of producers of the stage musical. There is an older man whose fatherliness seems a thin coating for duplicity, and two younger men, one straight and one gay. Both of them seem to be in the business for all the attractive young women or men it puts them in contact with (not that Gideon/Fosse doesn’t use his proximity to vulnerable, ambitious dancers for the same thing). The excruciating cross-cut sequence between the insurance company accountants who tell the producers that “You could become the first show on Broadway to turn a profit without really opening” and Gideon’s open-heart surgery is a different form of burlesque—a sick joke in which Fosse indulges himself, with no basis in actuality.

In *All That Jazz* perhaps of all his films, we see how Fosse thought like a dancer in his filmmaking. Fosse regarded temporality as the least important of the editing relations. Fosse edits for motif (as in music), for theme and variation, for rhythm, and for point and counterpoint, as well as more conventional establishment/breakdown/re-establishment of scenes (including musical numbers). His disregard for linearity was so great on some films that his staff coined a term, “Fosse Time.” For Fosse and Heim, this was a concept of “time as a jazz standard, there to be riffed on . . . , a network of asynchronous pieces of picture and sound” (Wasson, 374). The film starts in fairly conventional chronology—the show musical’s story of how a show is put on—before other elements take it in unanticipated directions.

One of the film's main themes with variations is the repeated sequence in which Antonio Vivaldi's "Concerto Alla Rustica for Strings and Continuo in G Major," is heard on an audio cassette player, accompanied by coughs, as Joe Gideon begins his day with a shower, an Alka-Seltzer, and a Dexedrine. This sequence ends, "It's showtime, folks!" It is seen and heard, though hardly repeated exactly, five times up until the episode that culminates in Joe's first heart attack. In the final "showtime," which takes the second half of the film, the "A-Number-One games-player," as TV host O'Connor Flood (Vereen) introduces Joe, makes "his final appearance on the great stage of life." Either it's no longer showtime and it's life for real, or it's "the final curtain" to which all of his behaviors have been leading.

While this film cannot with exactitude be called a musical, it includes scenes, especially the series of numbers that Joe hallucinates directing, which take off on conventions of movie musicals. The number that Fosse takes the most seriously is "Everything Old Is New Again," a song danced "offstage" by Katie (Reinking) and Michelle, to a record by Peter Allen; the song seems to signal a new beginning, a new appreciation for life, in opposition to "Air-otica," the ballet that points up everything dehumanizing about the sexual revolution. *All That Jazz* is as personal, and as formally complex and cinematically beautiful, as any film made in the Hollywood Renaissance. Like *Lenny*, it creates a dialectic between its narration—Joe's life as he tells it to Angelique (Jessica Lange)—and its drama. The film's central relationship is the courtship between Joe and Angelique, the angel of death.

Fosse's final three films greatly deepen the pattern set in *Cabaret*. Angelique's deathly but seductive anteroom, with stark black background and luminous white foreground, furnished with many of the personal effects we have seen in Joe's apartment, serves a similar function to the Kit Kat Klub. "Outside" is Joe's life in all its glorious creativity, its self-destruction, and its

latticework of relationships. The time is impossible to ascertain, until the heart attack, when cutaways to Angelique show her letting her hair down and preparing for the final seduction. Joe struggles to hold onto his “chastity,” while doing things like sneaking cigarettes and holding parties in his hospital room, which give him away as “easy.”

This is one New Hollywood film without an open ending, to put it mildly. Its ambiguity comes from the questions it raises. “If *All That Jazz* is Bob Fosse’s version of his own life,” asks Gottfried, “why does he die in it?” (384). It gives new meaning to the idea of the director’s having the final cut. **A film as audacious as *All That Jazz* is hard to imagine opening much later than Dec. 20, 1979, a New York premiere date it shared with another late Hollywood Renaissance masterwork, Hal Ashby’s *Being There*.**

Having staged his own fictional demise, Fosse still appeared determined to explore death. *Star 80* (1983) stands with troubling final films such as *Lola Montes* and *Eyes Wide Shut*. Formally, it’s nearly flawless, a confrontation with the consequences of the values of popular culture, his theme since *Cabaret*. A film about the murder of 1980 Playmate of the Year Dorothy Stratten by her estranged husband-promoter Paul Snider, who then killed himself, it was based on Teresa Carpenter’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *Village Voice* cover story, “Death of a Playmate.” The structure of Fosse’s screenplay is starkly simple. Paul Snider (Eric Roberts) is a Vancouver hustler who “manages” his young wife, Dorothy Stratten (Mariel Hemingway), into the semi-big time as a *Playboy* Playmate and then goes mad as she slips into the tawdry inbetween between exploitation and what passes for entertainment. Snider is called a pimp by none other than Hefner, who is played by Cliff Robertson, the square-jawed actor who once played JFK.

While the Stratten/Snider murder/suicide was reenacted in Fosse’s film, American movies and the Great White Way that Fosse had conquered were turning into carefully scrubbed

precincts resembling the rides at Disney World. Reagan Era culture seemed intent upon developing amnesia where the previous two decades were concerned. Fosse thought he could make the world look at the sexual revolution's appalling underside, but his own film becomes a part of it; like Hefner with many of his models, Fosse indirectly spurred Hemingway, who badly wanted the part, to have breast implants before he would cast her. The world refused to look. Critics, by and large, rejected *Star 80*; audiences stayed away. The film is as hard and honest as any of Fosse's films; however, without the clear object of Nazism in *Cabaret*, censorship in *Lenny*, or life and death itself in *All That Jazz*, *Star 80* implicates the entire culture, Fosse included. "You're playing *me* if I wasn't successful," the director stormed at Roberts on set (Wasson 526). The idea of a dazzling creator making art out of his fears of failure is not new. One can always regret that this angry dissection of damnation and the crushing of innocence was Bob Fosse's final film, but this director's signature blend of darkness and bedazzlement has never been so corrosively felt. It is also an all-too-fitting epitaph to 1970s auteur cinema.

The heart of *Star 80* is in Vancouver, British Columbia, the kind of flyover town that Fosse's films, with their trajectory of "NY to LA" (the original title of the show being put on in *All That Jazz*), had never before considered. Filming in the very same Dairy Queen where Paul first spotted Dorothy working behind the counter, Fosse cross-cuts from the murder scene in the depths of Los Angeles to the elusive but dubious heights from which Snider is repeatedly turned back. Whereas Fosse's Sally Bowles is hardly talentless, and Lenny Bruce and Joe Gideon have uncommon gifts, Paul Snider is a sub-ordinary guy in a celebrity culture that exaggerates the extraordinary. Paul promotes wet t-shirt contests, which Fosse stages, with no less degradation than he devoted to the mud wrestling in *Cabaret*. Desperate to impress, Snider practices in a mirror smiling and introducing himself; before long, his frustration turns to hatred. His

discovery, Dorothy Stratten, nee Hoogstratten, is a *Playboy* Playmate, a male fantasy of supposedly exceptional beauty, albeit one recreated by Hefner's magazine twelve times annually for over sixty years. Fosse defies the spectator to disregard the content and look purely at form—and discovers that this probably cannot be done. The opening credits take us back to the title sequences of *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Mean Streets*: photographs taking up part of the frame surrounded by a black background. Dorothy's "Oh gosh, me—a *Playboy* centerfold" interview on the soundtrack is uncomfortably at odds with her nude shots; "*Playboy*'s motto is the girl next door. They look for girls who are fresh and wholesome and naïve. They look for all that." "It took me five months to shoot my Playmate of the Year layout. I took over twenty thousand pictures. They don't go for just great nude shots. They go for art, perfect art. And I'm very proud of that. And I'm happy to share that with someone who can appreciate it."

Right away colliding ideas clash. The prurience, the masturbatory aspect of Playmate "appreciation" are the least of the monsters that dare not growl their names. The images of Hemingway as Stratten confront the spectator with an undraped Body Too Much, Jean-Louis Comolli's concept that the actor who plays a well-known person in a biography competes with our knowledge of the actual person. The tensions—Should this actress be playing this part? Should this film have been made?—squirm uncomfortably on the screen.

The idea of the auteur molding the actress to meet his design, like the *Playboy* photographers and editors refining the model into "perfect art," tussles with Stratten's ownership of her image. Dorothy's use of the first person pronoun. "*They* look for this . . ." becomes "it took *me* five months to shoot . . . *my* layout." (Emphasis mine). The woman's ownership of her image cannot be allowed. This is what drives Snider around the bend. Dorothy's fetishized images gaze back at the spectator. Her last line, "And I'm happy to share that with someone who

can appreciate it” is so counterintuitive when the topic is, finally, softcore porn, that the film crawls with contradictions even before Fosse thrusts us into its main conflict, which arrives soon enough.

The Eisensteinian montage collision, the Fossean dance steps, “not up and out, but down and in” become metaphors for Snider’s covetous rage which, gruesomely, Fosse is “happy to share with someone who can appreciate it.” *Star 80*, perhaps more than any of Hollywood Renaissance film, is still “looking for” the appreciation it has never received. Perhaps in the Trump Era, we might be finally ready for a film that faces the consequences of the culture’s fixation on celebrity worship at any cost.

Fosse will seemingly always be associated with death. Of Fosse’s two biographies, one is subtitled *The Life and Death of Bob Fosse*, and in the other, the chapters move backwards (Twenty Years, Five Years, One Year, and so on), in a morbid countdown. The great irony, however, is that Fosse’s cinematic dances of death keep on living. The letter that writer Pete Hamill wrote to Fosse, inspiring him, apparently, to transform *Ending* into *All That Jazz*, laid down “a hell of a challenge to you as a choreographer to design a film that *feels* like death. I want to see a Fosse film about a death that makes me feel what it will be like to die” (Hamill 1). Fosse’s films, ironically, are animated with life, while locked in a staring contest with death. The final shots of his last three movies all are of dead bodies. The zipping of the body bag that bluntly rings down the curtain on Joe Gideon’s life is followed by Ethel Merman’s lusty rendition of “There’s No Business Like Show Business” over the end credits. There’s no better example of rebirth and revision. Fosse changes the context and the meaning of Irving Berlin’s anthemic song for *Annie Get Your Gun*, which conveys resilience, power, glitter, and the appeal of the comeback. Unlike Berlin’s song, Bob’s Fosse’s films kept refusing the resilience of

showbiz. Like the song, however, Bob Fosse won't stay dead. But the same time, he conveys the precariousness of life—a man who dances, who glamorized women who dance, and whose film shots dance and flicker unpredictably.

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¹ Significantly, three of the top four were released in a 17-month period at the climax of the Hollywood Renaissance. Ahead of *All That Jazz* (released December 1979) were *Raging Bull* (November 1980), at Number 1, and *Apocalypse Now* (August 1979), at 3. Only *Citizen Kane*, no less, crashes this late-New Hollywood party, at Number 2 (Brevet).

² To see the crucial difference Fosse makes, one need look no further than the only two other film musicals Cy Feuer produced, the movie versions of *A Little Night Music* (1978) and *A Chorus Line* (1985), famous fiascos both.

³ He is a dissolute American millionaire in the Isherwood original.

⁴ See Bingham, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?*, 17-18.