

kind one used to see out of the corner of one's eye when New York was Drug & Fun City. The extraordinary stage actor Victor Garber plays him with perfect pitch, a lazy Swiss-school-to-Niarchos-yacht accent; he's a businessman for whom pleasure comes first, of indeterminate sexuality although ostensibly straight. When Tis summons John to a hospital waiting room because of an emergency having to do with a young girl Tis describes, in the wasteful jargon of Eurotrash, as "a walking vacuum cleaner," John runs into Marianne for a second time, at her mother's bedside in the same hospital. Marianne's sister, Randi, is there, too, an eager, loving, wary young woman, impeccably played by Jane Adams.

John and Marianne come together once more, and the tragedy is set off. The film is separated into acts, and the deliberate succession of scenes has at times an academic flavor; but what saves the film from being either an homage or an exercise is a sincere energy that comes across as purity. The story apparently came to Schrader in a dream, and he immediately woke and transcribed it; it has at once the hallucinated, hyperreal quality of some dreams, and the quirkiness of an absolutely true story. Yes, there are drugs in the film, and even a gun; but there is nothing generic about the characters or their reactions, not one moment when you think to yourself, "Well, of course he would do that." That kind of originality is rare these days, and to find it in a story about a drug dealer's search for truth and beauty is a gift. Schrader is truly an astonishing director, turning something tawdry into a form of gold.

Mistress is *The Player* without the nice toys. The values in *Mistress* are just as tacky, the setting is also Hollywood, but the players are neither young nor handsome; they are paunchy, washed up, threadbare; they eat in chain restaurants with plastic upholstery so shiny it's almost incandescent, they talk big, and they are ready to betray each other at every turn. Unlike the protagonists of *The Player*, they are not studio executives but the small-fry of Hollywood: an almost forgotten writer-director, an independent producer, and three businessmen who might invest in movies—each of whom trails with him a mistress who wants to play the lead. Whereas *The Player* had sixty-five stars in cameos as themselves, glimpsed in restaurants and hotels and parties and parking lots, *Mistress* has only one, glimpsed and accosted by the principals in a parking lot; and it says everything about this film that the star is Ernest Borgnine, although the disrespect implicit to Mr. Borgnine only proves what a good sport he is. One hopes he did not think he had been asked to appear in *The Player*.

Mistress is the work of Barry Primus, who mines the same lode as Robert Altman, and makes it just as trenchant in a far less pretty way. Robert Wuhl, whose face and hair share a certain sketchy quality, plays Marvin Landisman, a director once considered great who now makes cookery videos. He's barely forty-five, but as far as Hollywood is concerned, he's dead, or at least dead meat. One Jack Roth, played with insinuating efficiency by Martin Landau, tracks him down and tries to sell him the idea of reviving an old script of Marvin's: he has a live one who'll put up the money. Marvin, who has tried to learn to live with his failure and is about to move to New York with his restaurateur wife, is tempted back into his dream of Hollywood, against his better judgment. The live one turns out to



Anna Henriques as young Sooreleh in *The Man Without a World*

be an almost senile businessman, played by Eli Wallach with mean little eyes shooting out contempt; he has a *fausse* Madonna girlfriend. There's a middleman called Carmine, Danny Aiello in paroxysms of helpfulness, and finally a very rich and sinister man named Mr. Wright, played by Robert De Niro with some of the satanic confidence he displayed as the devil in *Angel Heart*. They, too, have girlfriends. As the film goes on, the restaurants get better, but the desperation of the hustlers accelerates; and when Borgnine is sighted, it's "Quick, get the script!"—a line often heard on Los Angeles parking lots.

Mistress is both warmer and more depressing than *The Player*, which had the advantage of containing only pretty people and no likable characters, and thus no one to identify with. *Mistress* is miserably close to life, without glamour, and its insights, while sharp, are not new. Of course, Marvin is given a cowriter, a young man who "had the same teachers in college as Spielberg" and whose father gets \$800,000 per script and might chip in with some advice; of course, having been plucked from despair, he will be humiliated back into it. Anyone who has ever been called a genius by a producer calling from a borrowed office will squirm through the film, and such people are legion. No one comes out well: Primus skewers the therapy-engendered self-respect of the women as sharply as the greed of the men, and the bitterness of the film, at first invigorating, finally turns sour. A bit more grace, a bit more poetic license, and a little less relentless accuracy might have made the film more enjoyable; it is a perfectly accurate picture of the hideous scramble for power and money, and at the end you feel no different than you do on most Monday mornings.

The Man Without a World is a complete, agreeable, and insubstantial fantasy by the artist Eleanor Antin, who is known for historical impersonations. She has presented herself as Eleanor Nightingale, a nurse in the Crimean War; Eleonora Antinova, a black dancer in Diaghilev's Ballets Russes; and now she sublimates herself into the personage of Yevgeny Antinov, a 1920s Soviet film director. The taking on of false identities in which to create Art is something I've been fascinated by for a while: it relates directly to the postmodern idea that we can use the past for our own purposes, and reshape it according to what we know now. Antin, as Antinov, has made a silent Yiddish film of the 1920s: instead of having to be an actor to become someone else, she becomes the someone else to be the director. The idea is alluring, and the film has an enchanting side: my familiarity with silent Yiddish films of the 1920s is limited, but the look of the black and white is convincing enough, and very gratifying to look at. But the story, set in a shtetl (Jewish community) has too much going on for one to care much, from a dead mother and a dybbuk under a bridge and an illicit affair to revolution and betrayal, and the caption cards carry so much information that they are almost like those encyclopedic panels on museum walls. *The Man Without a World* is an elegant exercise, finely done. Its run will be limited, and its unfortunate limitation comes from the fact that Ms. Antin/Mr. Antinov did not take enough liberties. The only anachronism in the film is a bit of libertinage in some oversize bushes and a little lesbian fling in the ritual bath; and neither of them contributes to what one would have hoped for, an illumination of the past from the perspective of the present. ● **ARTS** ▶ 300