

Our next meeting is with Shakespeare and Toyah Wilcox (Whoever thought they would get together?) when they create quite a storm in 'THE TEMPEST' on FEBRUARY 10TH.

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ATLANTIC CITY

Producer: Denis Heroux/Director: Louis Malle/Screenplay: John Guare/Photography: Richard Ciupka/Music: Michel Legrand/Editor: Susanne Baron/Production design: Anne Pritchard/105 minutes. Colour. Cast: Burt Lancaster, Susan Sarandon, Kate Reid, Michel Piccoli, Hollis McLaren, Robert Joy, Al Waxman, Robert Goulet.

No French director has become acclimatised to the United States as effortlessly as Louis Malle: and although his new film is a less subtle and evocative achievement than his previous American movie *Pretty Baby*, it still exhibits his sharp response to the picturesquely sleazy aspects of Stateside geography and social history. Like New Orleans in *Pretty Baby*, the New Jersey resort of Atlantic City has a chequered record of hedonistic, raffishly shady activities: and Malle's piece, wittily scripted by John Guare, constantly reminds us of this turbulent past, linking the place's progress to the careers of the story's main characters.

The use of the robust song "On The Boardwalk" (celebrating the city's tourist attraction in the late 19th century) also connects with the revival of the town's fortunes in the 1940s (after the prohibition excitements of the Twenties gave way to the Thirties Depression). The song was written for *Three Little Girls In Blue*, the 1964 Fox musical set in Atlantic City in the early, boom years of the 20th century. And this echo of Fox musicals of the Forties has an added relevance to one of the principal figures in Malle's picture: the blowsy, elderly gangster's widow Grace, who came to the town in World War Two to compete in a Betty Grable lookalike contest. Malle and Guare combine, too, the out-of-season desolation of the city as portrayed in Bob Rafelson's 1972 *The King of Marvin Gardens* (set in a period when the resort had once more become unfashionable) with the place's renewed popularity since the legalising of gambling in 1978.

Sally, an ambitious young casino employee, is so elated by this legal freedom that she declares "I'm going to deal my way to Monte Carlo!" — causing her elderly admirer Lou to comment, half-devotedly but half-ironically, "A regular Princess Grace!" However, Lou — a veteran of the "numbers" racket, a colleague of Grace's hoodlum

husband and now her servant and occasional stud — is more jaundiced than Sally in his attitude to Atlantic City's resurgence as a punter's paradise. He yearns for the town as it used to be when he first knew it, when the racketeers really had class. In part, of course, he simply pines for his irretrievably lost youth. He dreams of being "born again", just as the resort is being "born again" (according to the Paul Anka song delivered during the movie by Robert Goulet). His search for his vanished yesterdays inevitably takes an erotic focus, beautifully established in the opening scene as he spies on Sally while she anoints her body with lemon juice. The sensuous yet platonic mood of worship is hauntingly underlined by the strains of "Casta Diva" from Bellini's "Norma". Typically, though, this musical motif proves to have its own share of ironies. Sally is listening to this high art out of duty, at the request of a suavely amorous croupier who seeks to make her his casino Trilby. But in reality she is far from the "chaste goddess" hymned in the operatic aria. Lou's reverence for her young and innocent brand of sexuality is misplaced, and is in any case mingled with underlying lust. Moreover, Sally is quite ready to utilise his experience as a "man of the world" to further her career ("Teach me stuff" she begs him). And when he confesses his voyeurism, she seduces him partly in flattered arousal, partly to benefit from his seasoned wisdom in carnal matters as in other areas of living.

Fate brings the couple into contact with cocaine peddling, theft and murder: Lou, like the old master-crook in *The Asphalt*

Jungle, is an ageing lawbreaker with a weakness for pretty girls which could be his downfall. The core of *Atlantic City* lies in its sardonic yet sympathetic charting of the relationship that develops between Lou and Sally. Burt Lancaster is able to blend nostalgic echoes of his youthful appearances in Forties gangster melodramas with equally potent reminders of his more recent incarnations of fading virility in Visconti's films. And Susan Sarandon, as in *Pretty Baby*, embodies to perfection a kind of bruised voluptuousness, a hard-edged yet soft-centred ambiguity of femininity. Kate Reid as Grace, and Hollis McLaren as a spaced-out young hippie, stand out among the supporting cast: and Malle and Guare draw a shrewd parallel when Grace reminisces of her beauty-contest days ("I was a princess!"), by cutting to Sally (Lou's other "Princess Grace"). In deciding which of his "two Graces" Lou ends up with, the writer and director have to choose between finishing their tale in the style of *The Asphalt Jungle* (or, indeed, perhaps *High Sierra* and *Gun Crazy* and the two versions of *Thieves Like Us*), or finding an alternative resolution possibly more attuned to the cynical, realistic codes of the 1980s.

The episodes culminating in the chosen conclusion are not totally satisfactory: the film's black-comedy elements — always evident in the chance interactions of the characters — arguably get a shade out of hand when Sally attempts, for instance, to pass Lou off as her retarded father; and the final effect of the movie lacks the psychological concentration and intensity of Malle's very best work. His new

picture, in fact, ultimately fails to rise fully above the level of anecdote. But judged on that level, it remains a superior entertainment: wry, touching, often persuasive. Much of the visual and verbal detail is memorable. There's the dry humour of Lou's remark about the altruism of certain people ("Sinatra gives wings to hospitals. We all do what we can"). There's the delicious silliness of the hippie girl's declaration "I never wear seatbelts; I don't believe in gravity". There's the way in which Sally turns Lou and herself on to lovemaking, by asking him to recreate his voyeuristic sensations, while she duplicates her ritual of unbuttoning her blouse before rubbing herself with the lemons. And there is the way Malle holds Lou's face in unsparring close-up, reflecting the old man's anguished self-contempt as he is unable to stop Sally being attacked by thugs (although Sally's own anxiety, when she finally staggers to her feet, is for him). In contrast to this scene is Lou's hysterical, incredulous laughter when he eventually kills the two hoods (committing murder for the first time in his crooked life), followed by his eager appeal to Sally ("Didn't I protect you?"), and her worry this time about herself (she is afraid that one of the heavies may have cut her face with a knife). The contributions to the piece's consistently watchable impact by director, screenwriter and actors are admirably supplemented by Richard Ciupka's vivid camerawork, and by the rich variety of Anne Pritchard's set design (embracing hotels, casinos, dim red-lamped bars, cluttered bedrooms, and icily seedy washrooms).

Douglas McVay



Burt Lancaster, as Lou and Susan Sarandon as Sally in Louis Malle's *Atlantic City*