

In more ways than one

Rod Steiger is the Sergeant

PAUL SCHRADER

For better or for worse we're undergoing a flurry of films about homosexuals. Mostly it's for worse—the films have taught us little about homosexuals, less about ourselves. Unless, of course, we're all voyeurs when it comes to perversion. The worst offender is Robert Aldrich's "The Killing of Sister George." Aldrich's camera plays us all for lewd tourists ("Look, she's one too."); it's shot for gasps and giggles—and it gets plenty of both.

(Ironically, "Sister George" contains more explicit sex scenes than any heterosexual movie so far. Presumably we're supposed to be aghast, not titillated by deviate sex, so it's OK—a ruse that dates back to DeMille and is just as transparent.)

But at least "Sister George" is about homosexuality—even if it is the lewd superficial manner that audiences understood long before the screen became "liberal." Other recent films about homosexuality are not about homosexu-

ality at all—they treat it neither seriously nor as a side show.

John Flynn's "The Sergeant," for example, is not about homosexuality, but about Rod Steiger. In it Steiger brings full force to one of his many permutations, the burly fag, a role that can be traced back to the tycoon of "The Big Knife," Mr. Joyboy of "The Loved One," and the hairdresser of "No Way to Treat a Lady."

"The Sergeant" is Steiger's picture and every effort has been

made to keep out of his way. The camerawork calls no attention to itself; it is competent and predictable. The editing follows Steiger's dialogue unobtrusively. The settings are bland, but not disturbingly so. John Philip Law and Ludmila Mikael, intentionally or unintentionally, do not offer any competition to Steiger's performance. The music is the only item which seems blatantly conventional, and that when Steiger is off screen. In short, Spiro Agnew would seem luminous in this movie.

The result is predictable: Steiger has given himself such a load to bear that he sinks under it, and the film with him. This is not to slight Steiger's talent—which is

as considerable as ever—but no actor could carry this film. The Sgt. Albert Callan homosexual role is an "inner" portrait; one which is revealed more in dialogue than action. Insight and understanding of Callan's character must occur at "down" moments of the film, when the audience is recuperating from a tense scene. The dialogue then becomes very meaningful. But "The Sergeant" has only down moments; there are no ups. When Steiger delivers his meaningful lines, he must not only support his own scene but the insipid Law-Mikael sequence which preceded it. For two hours he tries to support the compounding weight of the film, finally giving up and shooting himself.

The failure of the "Sergeant" rests on Steiger. It is difficult to discredit the director. John Flynn is 31 years old and "The Sergeant" is his first film. The personal touches he has given the film are quite good: the milieu of the 1952 US maintenance base in France is refreshing, honest in an unspectacular way. But he was shooting Steiger's film, and if reports from location are accurate, he had to bend to the actor's overpowering personality.

Someone once said that Harry Langdon suffered from the actor's occupational ailment: he thought that his genius was self-created. As Steiger gets increasing control over his films, he seems to be contracting the malady. Actors are even more vainly competitive than the rest of us, and they assume that another's loss is their gain. As Steiger obtains power over directors and scripts, he seems intent on undermining anyone who might outshine him (and with understandable cause—as a supporting actor he often outshone the leads). For a long time Steiger did hack work for either respect or money, but today he doesn't have to work for a strong director, or compete with a strong actor. But strong American actors have always performed best with the competition: Newman against Gleason with Rossen, Brando against Cobb and Steiger under Kazan, and Steiger himself against Brando, Cobb, Bogart, Palance, Poitier.

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And keep your fingers crossed, troops. Here we go again.

The Sergeant

(Continued from Page 33)

Without competition, either from a director or actor, Steiger appears a gross parody of greatness. In the finale of "No Way to Treat a Lady" he was a paper-mache Lear, bloodily floundering about for no other reason than he was Rod Steiger. In "The Sergeant" the viewer is constantly aware that this is Rod Steiger, the actor, playing Rod Steiger, the faggot, Sgt. Albert Callan never comes to life simply because the audience is afforded no other entrance to him than through Steiger. "The Sergeant" is advertised as Steiger's picture, the man with "just one flaw," and that is all the audience ever gets: Rod Steiger. We are awed but not moved.

"Les Biches" isn't about homosexuality either, but I don't think that either the director, Claude Chabrol, nor the screen-writer, Paul Gegauff, know what it is about themselves.

Frederique (Stephane Audran) makes a lesbian pick-up with sidewalk artist Why (Jacqueline Sassard), taking her to her plush St. Tropez home. Two inept male homosexual servant-clowns have the run of the place, uttering lines that would make anyone plead insanity. Why sacks out with Paul Thomas (Jean-Louis Trintignant) partly for spite, partly for fun. Frederique then takes up with Paul to spite Why but for some unexplained reason falls in love, switching from AC to DC. Paul and Frederique are sunbathing. He goes in the house and finds Why dressing up like Frederique. He then returns to Frederique and says, "There's something strange going on here." If you don't know that you're on a bumper by now, you just might like this movie.

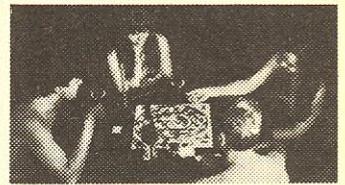
Chabrol makes no attempt to explicate his "sensual triangle" (an advertising term—and, incidentally, advertising plays an important role in films about homosexuality because it brings the

viewer into the theater with so many predispositions). We know they are all queer because they're wearing this year's Dolce Vita longing-look as they slink about the plush surroundings. The only thing really "creative" about this film is the various pastel backdrops Chabrol sets his characters in. But the time has past where a work may be credited simply because it has exquisite color ("Red Desert" was the only film to really pull this off); color photography has become a sufficiently commonplace craft so that we can expect some bones under that tender flesh. Nowadays beautiful color (as in "Elvira Madigan") is sometimes only a clue to the vapidness of the work itself.

When, at the conclusion of the film, Frederique rejects Why's advances because "your love is disgusting," we haven't the slightest idea why her love is now any more or less disgusting than it was at the film's beginning. It passes us over with the full weight of its two hours. "Les Biches" is a sleeper, that is, it's soporific.

Of these three films about homosexuals, "The Killing of Sister George" was the one I cared least to discuss. But it is also the one I remembered most: for all its crassness, at least it knows what movies are made of.

We're not guaranteeing, but...

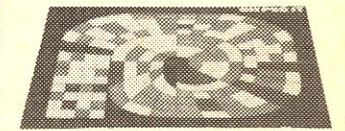


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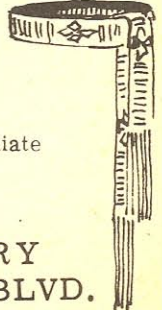
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