In more ways than one

Rod Steiger is the Sergeant

PAUL SCHRADE

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 lured tourists ("Look, She's one too!"); it's shot for gasps and giggles—and it gets plenty of both.
Project® every week, from time to time I will bring you up to date, and we can follow, together, the progress of the dream. Will starry-eyed Ellison get to write an honest script? Will the true word be given? Will the Blue Meanies at the network chop him off at the knees? Will George Eksenstein turn into a ghost and put script? Will Robert Stack have Ellison investigated by Hoover's Lads? Stay tuned to this column for the thrilling next installment.

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

The Sergeant

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Without competition, either from a director or actor, Steiger appears to shine. 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, Stg. Albert Calbret. When Steiger 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 aware but not moved.

"Less Blackbelt isn't about homosexuality, but I don't think that either the director, Claude Chabrol, nor the screenwriter, Paul Gessner, know what it is about themselves. Frederique (Stephanie Andran) makes a lesbian pick-up with sidewalk artist Why (Jacqueline Sassard), taking her to her plush St. Tropez home. Two inept male homosexual-clown crows have the run of the place, uttering lines that should make anyone insane. 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 summing. 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 what you're on a summer by now, you just might like this movie.

Chabrol makes no attempt to explicate his "sensual triumph" (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 long-look as they sulk in 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 when 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 vacuity 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 sicker, that is, it's sopper. 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.

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