

A Verdant Vigil

Waiting, directed by Jackie McKimmie. Opening in Sydney on 1 March at the Academy Twin and Walker St cinemas; coming soon to Melbourne. Reviewed by Jeremy Eccles.

Film-maker Jackie McKimmie and the actor and arts spokesperson Noni Hazlehurst can be assumed to be on the same wavelength when it comes to personal politics.

They've now made four films together—the award-winning short *Stations*, the almost unknown feature *Australian Dream*, a dramatised documentary on child abuse *Breaking Through* and, finally, *Waiting*. I've seen only the two features, and they have similarities in both being broad women's satires on family and society. And, while both are tinged with feminism, there's no way that even the basest phallocrat could be upset by statements of the "my gender, right or wrong" sort. In fact, some of the firmer feminists might be upset.

Given Noni Hazlehurst's increasing profile as a nominee (at least) for the Chair of the Australia Council, as a Keating Fellowship winner, as a board member of Film Australia and as a founder of Australian Artists' Films, one would have to say she was brave to take parts like *Fran* or the McKimmie pair which explore women's issues without necessarily following the approved path through them. McKimmie's films, for instance, are frequently funny!

Australian Dream, for instance, gave Graeme Blundell his best part on or off stage or screen for years as a Queensland butcher desperate to get National Party pre-selection for parliament. Noni, as his wife, doesn't simply see through his pathetic personal and political ambitions as a result of reading Germaine Greer (as happens in the play, *Wallflowering*) but is actually led astray by a spunk of a sex-aids salesman. The film ends with Blundell's dreams in tatters, and Noni

in the back of a panel van with spunky John Jarrett, still unsatisfied, demanding, "Is that all there is?"

Noni's subsequent marriage to Jarrett and the birth of a son may have played more than gossip column roles in *Waiting*. For the gloriously pregnant mother was captured swimming naked for the film some two years before the script was finished and the rest put on celluloid. And Noni's summation from the earlier time that "you're away with the pixies for the last couple of weeks of pregnancy", certainly lies at the heart of a film that



Noni Hazlehurst

lays waste to such trendy theories as the open marriage, surrogacy without emotion, wimmin's film-making, and the joys of Nimbin-like rural hideaways.

Four old school-girlfriends are gathering for the last act of a nine-month long project which will see the birth by Clare (Noni Hazlehurst) of a surrogate baby for Sandy and Michael (sired by the latter—a willowy Frank Whitten—with some difficulty, but desperately desired by Sandy—a bossy Helen Jones), filmed by Therese (Fiona Press) as final proof of the superfluosity of male medical expertise, and witnessed by the trendily successful Diane (Deborra-Lee Furness). Unfortunately, Clare's rural hideaway is bogged in mud, her painting career has just taken off with the Moët et Chandon Award to spend

a year in Paris, and a wandering boyfriend who may well have been the father anyway. Although contractions have started, the birth is psychologically delayed by the need to resolve at least some of the outstanding issues - such as Sandy and Michael's rocky marriage, and the arrest of their adopted kids for joy-riding. But Therese has nicked her film equipment and needs to get it back by the end of the weekend, and Diane has brought along a lover, who, secretly, is a doctor!

Set-up scenes to establish this mélange are frankly too brief and incomplete in detail. But much can be forgiven as director of photography Steve Mason makes the most of last summer's excessive wetness to capture the Hunter Valley in bellbirded mistyness. And around the chaotic house, one can't find a better description than Noni Hazlehurst's (in an earlier interview): "Jackie's always painting pictures. The camera may only glimpse in the background what is the message of any shot, while in the foreground she has the courage to put situations that you wouldn't think you'd believe". And by far the strongest belief to emerge from *Waiting* is Sandy's that motherhood is the only career she ever wanted, and her eventual loss of the 50% owned baby that she'd even been to pre-natal classes to prepare for feels like quite a tragedy.

Stand-out performances, though, come from Fiona Press as the 70s throwback film-maker, and her punk daughter (Noga Bernstein) who fights against the denial of femininity that her mum's imposed by dying to do the cooking! Good old Ray Barrett is wonderful, too, as the wry neighbouring farmer observing all and delivering the baby with aplomb at the end.

Will women see this film in which men are basically passengers differently? I can't see queues at the cinemas - but many will sneak a look when it comes on the ABC (who are co-producers) later.

JEREMY ECCLES is a Sydney theatre critic.

A Lech of vision

Solidarity and the Politics of Anti-Politics: Opposition and Reform in Poland Since 1968, by David Ost. Temple University Press, 1990. Reviewed by Paul Hockenos.

It is all the more unsettling today to look at the early Solidarity movement.

A decade after the radical trade union's first efforts to forge a participatory civil society in communist Poland, the recent presidential election ended in an embarrassing debacle for the country. Manipulating a brand of populist demagoguery only slightly less vile than that of his opponent, Solidarity leader Lech Walesa ensured himself a landslide victory.

How differently it all started. In his superb book *Solidarity and the Politics of Anti-Politics*, political scientist David Ost chronicles the trajectory of the Polish postwar opposition from its roots in the fascist resistance to Solidarity in 1989. The author, a correspondent from Warsaw during the 80s, astutely bridges academic disciplines, interweaving social theory with intellectual and political history to explain the underlying *raison d'être* of Solidarity. While a number of excellent sources document the union's breath-taking debut on the world political stage in 1980, the Ost book goes a critical step further to address the movement's theoretical foundations. It is a step that is essential for coming to grips with the logic of the opposition movements throughout Eastern and Central Europe.

In all of the East bloc states, the 70s was a grim time for the democratic opposition. The Prague Spring crack-down in 1968 reverberated throughout the communist countries, putting an end to the opposition's hopes for a progressive socialist alternative to the single party state. After decades of resistance and debate aimed at transforming the state structures, activists were finally convinced of the system's inherent unreform-

mability. The "post-ideological" nature of the Eastern systems, said dissidents such as Adam Michnik, precluded Left arguments that tried to initiate change by contrasting real, existing socialism with socialist ideas. "The bond," wrote Michnik in the early 70s, "tying the revisionist intelligentsia to the party was definitely severed."

It was clear that the opposition had reached an impasse. The essence of the system was the monopolisation of public life on every level. The single party state's claim to the 'universal' representation of its subjects' interests underlined all forms of pluralist social activity. Reform appeared impossible, opposition was outlawed, and yet, the dissidents knew, resistance was still imperative.

A new theory of politics was needed to bypass the entrenched bureaucracy. The answer to the impossibility of politics came in the form of "anti-politics". Led by 68-schooled intellectuals like Michnik, the opposition redirected its efforts toward civil society itself, the independent social space that the state denied. Rather than an outright negation of politics, anti-politics relocated the politics' public from the state to the social sphere. The strategy left "politics as usual" to the ruling elites, claiming civil society, or the "public sphere", as philosopher Jürgen Habermas has termed it, as the exclusive realm of the opposition.

The democratisation of society from below, the oppositionists reasoned, would expose the State's ultimate illegitimacy, although not necessarily alter its intransigent stand. If conducted on a mass scale, the people could ignore the state, acting as citizens without its permission. "Every independent social initiative," wrote veteran radical Jack Kuron, "challenges the monopoly of the State and thereby challenges the basis upon which it exercises power." "Civil society" was the central category of the Left in the 70s and Solidarity in 1980. A "permanently open democracy", initiated by an inde-

pendent and self-conscious citizenry, charted a "third road" between the stalinist systems in the east and the parliamentary democracies in the West. For the young trade union, the goal was an alternative neither capitalist nor socialist, neither Eastern nor Western, but an original model that appropriated the positive elements of both systems. While the strategy blurred the classic left-right distinction, the goals of early Solidarity, argues Ost, perhaps a little too strongly, were solidly Left in their emphasis on self-organisation and participatory democracy.

The birth of Eastern Europe's first independent trade union, however, obviously breached anti-politics' strict division of the political and social spheres. "As soon as the [anti-political] program reached its fruition," writes Ost, "it became obsolete." The euphoric days of late summer and autumn 1980 were short-lived. Before long, Walesa and Solidarity abandoned the anti-political plan and were negotiating overtly political deals with the government.

While Solidarity continued to track the opposition through the 80s, the discussion of early Solidarity's roots constitute the study's most original and intriguing chapters. At the same time, the author leaves some key issues surrounding the nature of the Polish opposition movement unaddressed. What the book fails to provide is a socio-historical context for Polish political culture that might shed some light on the vast discrepancy between Solidarity's radical beginnings and the reality of political consciousness throughout post-communist Eastern Europe. Ost portrays the anti-political movement in Poland as one embraced by "millions of people" and the Polish autumn as the "kind of world that has always been close to the dreams of the left", comparable to 1968 Paris or Barcelona in 1936.

PAUL HOCKENOS is a freelance journalist in Budapest.

Esoteric Exile

Exit: A Romanian Story by Richard Wagner, Verso \$24.95. Reviewed by McKenzie Wark.

The remarkable thing about Wagner's novella about everyday life as a writer in Ceausescu's Romania is its quiet, clear, matter of factness. Rather than attempt to shock or alarm the reader with tales of horror and woe, Wagner recounts small stories laced with telling detail.

slip into the reader's consciousness precisely by avoiding spectacular effects.

The full horror of Ceausescu's regime hangs heavily over this volume, but it does so precisely through its absence. Rather than offer the reader a revelation of the true story behind the old lies, Wagner simply but clearly recounts life in its concreteness and inconsequence. Nothing is revealed and that is precisely why *Exit* is a terrifying book. It shows vividly the extent to which a barbaric regime can penetrate the very pores and fabric of everyday life, not by putting its totalitarian stamp on everything, but by fostering a festering culture of petty power, pointless principle and blank indifference.

Wagner's story, which has an autobiographical feel to it, concerns the last days in Romania of the poet Stirner. Stirner doesn't realise it, but he is preparing to leave Romania, headed for the West. The striking thing about Stirner's passage to the West is its complete lack of heroics or self-justification. Stirner is a man of principles and does his best to stick to them. All the same he dryly notes his own petty compromises, taking a line out of a poem to get it past the censor. He is a dissident of sorts, marginal but tolerated. His books come out in tiny editions on pulpy grey paper. He has no idea who reads them—perhaps only the police. He muses without irony on the conjecture that the entire print run of his book will be pulped and recycled, ready for the next difficult poet who will be printed and pulped again, unread.

Stirner does not want to be a tolerated dissident. He knows only too well that the dissident plays the same game as the official writers and ends up even more compromised. He ruminates with disgust on those cautious writers who slip vague anti-government allusions into their poems. Allusions so erudite and obscure that only their greatest fans and most diligent readers will detect their nuance and

flavour. The most dedicated connoisseurs of dissidence are, after all, the police. Although they are an appreciative and remarkably attentive audience, they are not the audience Stirner craves. He wants readers who might sustain for him his own self-image as a writer, which is dissolving into nothing in his last days in Romania. We can only wait with interest to see if Stirner's caustic miniatures on Eastern life are complemented with an equally astute reading of everyday life in the West.

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The unfortunate truth is that shocking and disturbing Eastern European writing ceases to shock or disturb after a while. In the West, we are all too accustomed to tragic stories about other people's misery. It is our unique and privileged form of barbarism to pay such things passing attention for a while and drift off, bored and listless, looking for something else. Wagner's svelte little book manages to

sybylla

Sybylla Press, the Melbourne-based feminist publishing group, plans to publish a collection of contemporary writing by women in late 1991.

The collection may include fiction and non-fiction in a variety of forms: stories, playscripts, poetry, critical articles, extracts and so on.

The focus of the collection will be on how key stories, at particular times, inform people's sense of identity. Sybylla is particularly keen to collect writing which challenges or rewrites traditional versions of personal and collective identity.

Our hope is that this collection will generate alternative and politically enabling ways of thinking about ourselves and social change.

Send your submission (and a stamped self-addressed envelope for return) direct to Sybylla Press, or write to us for further information: Ross House, 247 Flinders Lane, Melbourne, 3000.

Submissions close 31 March 1991.