

Mistaken Identity

The Secret Life of Jesus, Robert Macklin (Pan Books, 1990).
Reviewed by John Squires.

Hot on the heels of the controversial television documentary, *The Riddle of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (and further removed from the equally controversial film, *The Last Temptation of Christ*), comes this readable account of *The Secret Life of Jesus*. All three reinterpret the traditional view of Jesus put forward by the Christian church by emphasising the humanity of Jesus. This is an important corrective to lopsided ecclesiastical practice.

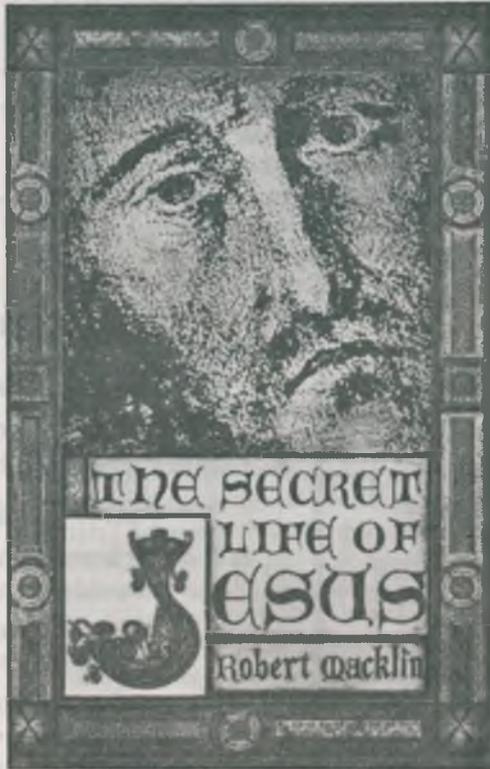
In tracing the life of Jesus, Macklin accepts the conventional account of Jesus as a travelling preacher, miracle worker, and political agent provocateur. Yet, despite the traditional, almost pietistic, style of the cover, the contents of this book are far from traditional, and certainly not pietistic. Macklin contends that, in addition to this familiar public life, Jesus lived a "secret life". By extrapolating from various hints in the Gospels, Macklin reveals the causes and the course of this "secret life".

This "secret life" of Jesus, born out of rejection by his own family, is compounded by his unattractive physical appearance. After intense study with the Essene community (the people of the Dead Sea Scrolls), Jesus attracts not only followers in Galilee, but also a coterie of disciples in Jerusalem whom he slips away to visit secretly, unbeknown to his Galilean disciples. Jesus is often drunk and enjoys sexual relationships with both female and male disciples. A fatally flawed psyche, derived from traumatic earlier experiences, drives Jesus to plot

with Judas for his arrest, believing that God would rescue him from his inevitable fate and establish the New Kingdom.

There is, indeed, an important story to be told about the essential human nature of Jesus. Macklin's book, however, does not tell that story. His thesis is based on misuse of psychoanalytic theory, misunderstandings of the world of the first century and misinterpretations of the Gospel accounts.

Assuming that the New Testament intends simply to record straight, fac-



tual history, Macklin reads the Gospels (as well as the Old Testament and the writings of Flavius Josephus) in a flat, literalistic manner. Scholars have demonstrated that this was not the primary intention of the Gospel writers. They write not to tell the history of Jesus but to explain his significance. (Thus, the problem of discovering the "historical Jesus".)

Macklin presumes that each Gospel can contribute to an overall, synthesised picture of Jesus. Again, modern scholarship has demonstrated that each Gospel writer has his own perspective. Numerous passages are interpreted out of context.

The texts concerning "family rejection" are dealt with as absolutes by Macklin, whereas they should be seen as part of a wider picture. To understand correctly Jesus' words about "hating family" we should see him as demonstrating priorities within a spectrum, rather than prescribing absolute norms. There is a polemical edge throughout this book, sharpened no doubt by Macklin's personal antagonism towards his subject. Consistently, he prefers the viewpoint of any text not accepted as orthodox by the church.

He criticises the four canonical Gospels as biased, misleading, and incompetent, while accepting as completely accurate accounts dated far later than the first century. He misunderstands the way scripture was used in the time in which the Gospels were written, accusing Matthew of fabrications when he was simply interpreting sacred texts in the manner of countless zealous Jews of the day.

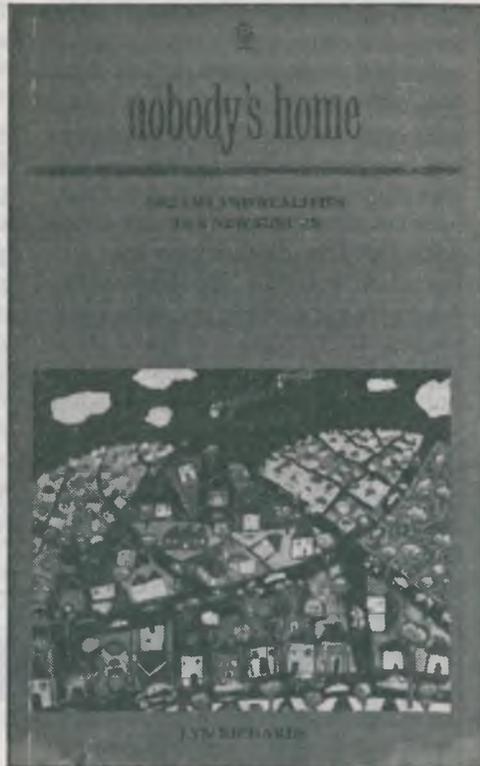
There is a scholarly veneer to this book (it contains endnotes, an index, a bibliography and references to scholarly works), but it is far from professional in its approach to interpreting the Gospels. The bibliography omits almost all the leading modern Gospel interpreters, notably ignoring Jewish scholarship about Jesus. To wander into the minefield of Gospel interpretation without knowing the pitfalls is dangerous. Too often another mine explodes and Macklin's flawed method is revealed. In the section of the book devoted to "The Evidence", Macklin purports to set out the evidential basis for the "secret

Suburban Truths

Nobody's Home, by Lyn Richards. (Oxford University Press, 1990.) Reviewed by Jil Toovey.

Nobody's Home is a piece of serious sociological research that deserves a wide reading. As in her previous books, *Having Families*, *Fathers at Home* and *Mothers and Working Mothers*, Richards incorporates a significant amount of her interview material. She believes that the individual voice gives a special insight into the social fabric, especially when combined with a few sensible graphs and statistics.

The voices of the 'real people' are gems indeed; and they leap out and sparkle, giving the book a vitality that is missing in the majority of academic texts! The setting is Green Views, pseudonym for a newly built estate lying



some 20 kilometres out of Melbourne, promoted by the developers as an estate designed specifically for country style living. The emphasis was on the family's needs and the importance of community. Richards alerts us to the irony that lies embedded within these fantastic notions! Massive contradictions are inherent in the dream of a community of individual home owners, heightened within the context of capitalism. The essential individualism continually undermines the tenets of collectivism and inhibits the growth of community consciousness.

Richards is constantly struck by the enormity of these contradictions and, influenced by the various streams of marxist thought, she interprets the inconsistencies from a left perspective. The developers are seen for what they are - motivated by self interest. The notion of a classless society is questioned in the face of consistent reference to a complex

life" of Jesus. However, this section contains a glaring inaccuracy which typifies his approach. Macklin contends that a description of the "decidedly unheroic appearance" of Jesus is to be found in the 'Gospel according to Thomas', one of the Gnostic texts discovered in 1945. Jesus was allegedly "under three cubits tall, with a very dark complexion, a bowed back, and a long face with bushy eyebrows which form a continuous line". No specific reference in the 'Gospel according to Thomas' is provided for this description. This is not surprising, as no such description exists! Macklin is guilty not only of sloppy interpretation but also of deliberate falsification of the evidence.

The description of Jesus is most probably being confused with a description of Paul found in the 'Acts of Paul and Thecla', another early Christian document which was not accepted as orthodox by the church. In this book, Paul is described as "a small man in height, with a bald head, bent legs, a ruddy complexion (i.e. swarthy, dark?), with eyebrows meeting in the middle, a little long-nosed, full of grace" (my translation of the Greek).

The similarities are obvious. Macklin has not checked the 'evidence' - a practice which may be acceptable in journalistic circles but is not befitting an attempt to write a serious life of Jesus. This life of Jesus, then, reflects Macklin's own prejudices about Jesus

and about faith. Before he went to Africa to become a world-famous medical missionary, Albert Schweitzer published a lengthy investigation into the "lives of Jesus" which had been written over the preceding 150 years. His conclusion was that each author wrote an account of Jesus which fitted best with his own preconceptions.

This is certainly the case with *The Secret Life of Jesus*. We learn far more about the author than we do about the subject.

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system which distinguishes one from the other. And there is the paradox of 'neighbourliness'. A community is defined as a group of people who are friendly towards one another. However, it appears that friendliness between neighbours must be constrained by explicit regulations and rules, for instance: "You must always say hello, but never invite a neighbour over for a meal", explains one resident.

Out there, in suburbia, the gender roles have an historical ring to them and equality between the sexes is not high on the priority list. Yes, the men and the women are together, striving to secure the family home but, no, this togetherness does not extend into the realms of housework and child care.

Women are compelled to earn an income to help pay the mortgage and traditional ideology still dictates the roles within the private sphere. The most shocking feature was the complacency of both sexes. When questioned on the importance of the family home, the woman responds, "I can't look", she laughed, "there are six people messing it up and only one cleaning it, there's just not enough time." He said, almost as if she had not spoken, "Well, I always look forward to coming home."

Richards maps the trends that suck women into the workforce and notes a widespread dilemma. The contentment of women who decide to work full time is disturbed by money worries, and the satisfaction of women working outside the home is undermined by their anxiety over the kids. There seems to be no solution at hand. As the economy worsens, funding for child care is reduced, true priorities are revealed.

Apart from these disturbing trends, Richards uncovers others and, in doing so, challenges many of the assumptions we make about the rate of social change, working mothers, the multicultural society and the benefits of a community.

The forces that unite groups of people seem to depend on unpalatable levels of uniformity. The effect of this "stifling community" is "vulnerability of women to competitiveness, gossip and surveillance".

Conformity is the name of the game and the key to belonging. In *Nobody's Home* we read of the common belief in an easygoing Australian society marked by tolerance and acceptance. Yet, in the same sentence, we discover a festering underworld where migrants are acceptable only if invisible and silent, and the family who parks the work truck in the street is subjected to insidious intimidation and harassment.

Superficial notions of friendliness and support fracture, giving way to collective paranoia. Supposed classlessness emerges as a preoccupation with the fine distinctions that differentiate, not unite. The constant reference to being "all in the same boat" is cleverly rephrased by Richards as "all under the same pressure" and only then did the attitudes make some sort of ironic sense.

The findings of the research cover more ground than I have mentioned and are fascinating in isolation.

Nevertheless, I would like to see further work done which integrates common ideology into a left analysis that aims to formulate policy and proposals for action. Clearly, the multitude of suburban dwellers are trapped in the sticky web of cultural and economic reality. It is also clear that they feel pretty well powerless and have low expectations in relation to their social and political rights.

If we wish to break down the barriers between those who live in the suburbs and who feel relatively relaxed about it, and those who view the suburbs as a dangerous breeding ground of apolitical inaction, then we must see reality from where they stand. Perhaps, then, we can begin to construct an alternative that appeals to suburban dwellers and aims to ease the difficulties they experience on all fronts. If you believe this is important, read *Nobody's Home*.

JIL TOOVEY is a community sector worker in Melbourne.

COMING UP

The politics of identity

Liberal women: interview

Neville Brody on Neville Brody

Enterprise bargaining: the great debate

Saint Bernard

Bernard Shaw, vol. 1 1856-1898: The Search for Love, by Michael Holroyd. (Penguin 1990.) Reviewed by Roger Coates.

Writing in the 1946 preface about the success of his play *Pygmalion* (first performed 1914), Shaw, then aged ninety, boasted that the popular acclaim of a play "so intensely and deliberately didactic" on a theme - linguistic reform - "esteemed so dry" proved "that great art can never be anything else" but didactic.

It is tempting to consider Michael Holroyd's biography using *Pygmalion* to illustrate how the play embraces so many features of Shaw's life. For it has them all: his puritanical industriousness and moralising, his concern with social class and self-improvement, his relationships with actresses and his representation of sexuality and marriage.

Shaw liked to think of himself as an artist-philosopher. Although the claim of philosopher was half conceit - another of his characteristics - Shaw undoubtedly achieved his central goal of becoming an important and successful artist. And, if the claim of artist-philosopher cannot be sustained, perhaps a claim of artist-politician can - not a 'real' politician but a simple man-of-affairs who played a very substantial role in establishing the modern socialist movement in Britain in the 1880s, and whose subsequent work as a playwright and writer of prefaces and other texts helped to spread socialist ideas far and wide.

Holroyd's first volume of what is destined to be the definitive biography takes the story from Shaw's mid-Victorian Dublin birth in 1856 up to his London marriage in 1898 to the Anglo-Irish Fabian heiress, Charlotte Townshend-Payne. Shaw had arrived in London at the age of twenty, having

left Dublin soon after his mother. Born into a slightly run-down, semi-bohemian branch of an Anglo-Irish gentry family, with his formal experience of life limited to a little general education, a bit of commercial schooling and a few years of work, mainly in a land agent's office, he came to London determined to shape his life in a completely different direction.

Establishing himself in the Reading Room of the British Museum, he set himself four goals in order to turn himself into a real subject: to acquire learning; to skill himself for an artistic career; to be a success by the standards of the time; and not least to turn the world upside down as recommended by Shelley, his first philosophical guide. Despite his partial estrangement from his mother, it was her small private income and her indulgence that enabled Shaw to contemplate such a self-centred undertaking.

Not that Shaw was any sort of layabout. The details are amazing but essentially Shaw freelanced to fame and fortune by dint of an iron will, an incredible program of self-development and an extraordinary degree of dedication and sheer hard work. Above all, he persisted where lesser souls would have given up. He poured an immense amount of energy into five novels, getting knockback after knockback; then he worked for ten years writing play after play before getting the public recognition he craved.

"Learn to stand absolutely by thy self ... Leaning on nothing ... Fearing no power ... A little independent universe", he wrote in 1878 in an early blank verse *Passion Play*. This intense individualism, while modified by his subsequent socialism, remained at the centre of his personality and character.

Shaw is remembered as a man of the Left, but his political activities, interwoven with his artistic and moral development, have often been ig-

nored, or at best treated rather lightly. One of the strengths of Holroyd's book is that he largely succeeds in bringing together the artistic, public and private sides of its subject. He shows that long before he finally came before the general public as a successful and controversial playwright, Shaw had embarked on an unpaid career in the 1880s socialist revival. At this time, as he later ironically remarked, he became a man whose business was socialism.

Shaw's early unsuccessful novels expressed his heterodox ideas. From 1880 he advanced his program of self-development even more vigorously, frequenting all manner of literary, debating and heuristic groups, acquiring communicative skills unavailable to the bookish man. Among these groups was the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), founded in 1881 to promote surreptitiously Marx's social democracy. After attending a couple of meetings in 1883, Shaw became a candidate member and spent several weeks studying the French translation of *Capital*, its impact being evident in *The Unsocial Socialist*, his last finished novel. However, while he continued to congregate with Social Democrats, he failed to join the fairly orthodox organisation, preferring towards the end of 1884 to join another socialist group, the newly-formed, rather select, Fabian Society.

Shaw preferred the Fabian Society because he wanted to work, so he said, with people of "equivalent mental training". This was only half the truth because the SDF had its share of such people, but the Fabian Society had no working class members. It was made up of Oxford graduates, journalists, teachers, civil servants and the odd failed stockbroker or banker.

Shaw quickly became a force among the Fabians. He was not so much (in Lenin's famous phrase) a good man fallen among Fabians as a principal founder of Fabianism, whose 1000-word manifesto (*Tract 2*) he wrote soon after he joined. Among

the first fifty Fabian Tracts the number written by Shaw (nine, including several key texts) was second only to the number written by Sidney Webb (twenty-three). In addition, Shaw organised and edited the famous *Fabian Essays* of 1889 and wrote two of them himself, significantly, those on economics and the transition to socialism.

Among the Fabians Shaw was on the left wing, having a particularly strong attachment to William Morris both as a socialist and as an artistic man. What cohesion this group had began to fall away by 1885. It was divided by temperament, moral and political judgments, ideological disagreements and the consequences of the social unrest brought on by a big rise in unemployment in 1885-87.

Unlike Morris, the Fabians including Shaw were leary of the SDF's agitation among the unemployed, the demonstrations and the violence. They increasingly looked for substitutes for marxist theories and concepts, shifting away from surplus value and the idea of the class-dominated state. Shaw remained ambivalent but at times showed his understanding of the problems involved in establishing socialism in Britain. In the 25 years from 1883 to 1908 he went through several phases: a quasi-marxist attachment to revolution, constitutional socialism, labourist and outright revisionist critic. From the appendix to *Man and Superman* (1903), his formula for a revolution based on the English constitution - an English general election

is as good as somebody's else's revolution - is fairly typical of the paradox he cherished.

Apart from Annie Besant, the famous secularist orator (a Shaw recruit) who briefly played an important role in the Bryant and May's match girls' strike (1888), the Fabians were either repelled by or stood aside from the rising tide of industrial militancy and independent labour consciousness remaking the British working class in these years. By the end of the 1880s, a leading group of socialist trade union activists - Burns, Hardie, Mann, etc - had begun to emerge and, in one or two cases, they worked closely with leading Fabians. But to everybody's disadvantage the Fabians were not very eager to reciprocate the interest.

Unlike many provincial Fabian societies who sent delegates to the founding conference of the Independent Labour Party at Bradford in 1893, the London Society laid down preconditions for its participation, provoking the conference to question Shaw's credentials. From the gallery Shaw further upset the dour north-erners with characteristic impish nonchalance. Not surprisingly, the trade unionist politicians concentrated on the new Labour Party and the struggle to convert the Trade Union Congress to Labour politics, and to win support for the Labour Party.

Unlike Engels, the Fabians at this time attached little importance to the political significance of the trade unions, preferring to pursue socialist permeation of the Liberal Party and

the London Radicals with whom they shared many policies and ideas. As part of this London coalition, Shaw had a brief political career in local government, first as a vestryman then, after the 1899 reforms, as a St Pancras Progressive Party borough councillor. But this diversion from his principal goal - West End success - came to an end with a sudden triumph in the theatre in the United States, leading him to renew his siege of Shaftesbury Avenue and Drury Lane.

It is no doubt idle to dwell on what might have been, but both Hyndman and Morris retrospectively regretted the path Shaw took in the mid-1880s. Hypothetically, among Hyndman, Morris, Shaw, Webb, Annie Besant, Beatrice Potter (Webb), Burns, Hardie and Mann, there were the elements of a coherent, effective, broadly-based leadership of a major united socialist movement. Among this group it was acknowledged that Shaw had the best potential to weld these diverse personalities together around a set of agreed beliefs.

But shared understanding of the character and diversity of the socialist project would have been necessary. For the realisation of this consensus two things were required: a satisfying general theory of socialism and an effective application of the theory to the specific circumstances of British life. Neither, however, was evident and, despite a century of effort in which Shaw played a major pioneering role, they remain absent.

ROGER COATES is a Sydney historian.



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The Festive Season

Film Festival season is upon us, and thousands of buffs retreat to primeval darkness. Martina Nightingale and Mike Ticher report on the Melbourne and Sydney film fests.

Melbourne

For all but the truly dedicated film buff, perusing the Melbourne Film Festival program can be a daunting experience. With 160 features and shorts from all over the world, how do mere lovers of film make their choices?

But according to the Festival director, Tait Brady, the program offered this year will yield many rewards for those brave enough to venture into the various designated art house cinemas around Melbourne between June 7 - 23. He says the program is designed to make it physically possible to see all the films for a mere \$165. And if that sounds like pushing the pleasure principle to the limits of endurance, the more casual filmgoer can purchase three session tickets at \$36 which then entitles the bearer to buy single tickets to films of their choice.

It is in the nature of festival programming that the definite arrivals of films from such diverse countries as Finland and Taiwan are not certain until the eleventh hour. But ALR managed to gain some inside information on some of the films likely to have particular appeal to those with a taste for both form and substance.

According to Brady, a definite must comes from Taiwanese director Hou Hsiao-hsien. Those who have already seen *The Time to Live and the Time to Die* will need no convincing that this year's festival offering *City of Sadness* will be well worth the two and a half hours of intensive viewing. The film is set during the political turmoil of 1945-49 and centres on the Vin family,



James Baldwin taking tea, in a scene from *The Price of the Ticket*

following the destinies of three very different brothers. Brady says it is impossible to describe what it is about this slow-paced film that makes *City of Sadness* so compelling. It has been variously described as "brave", "poetic", lyrical, and Hou Hsiao-hsien heralded as one of the most talented filmmakers in the world today.

Another feature film likely to be of interest to watchers of the turbulent changes in Eastern Europe is *Larks on a String*. The film's director Jiri Menzel has enjoyed international recognition by winning, in 1967, an academy award for *Closely Watched Trains*.

This film, made only two years later, has been securely locked away from public scrutiny for over twenty years following the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. The film takes a satirical and bleakly humorous look at the re-education of 'bourgeois elements' in society after the advent of the communist regime in the 'fifties.

It's hardly surprising that *Larks on a String* did not please the authorities. Some critics claim that this film does not quite match the perhaps inflated expectations raised by Menzel's previous offerings and its long incarceration. But they agree that it's definitely worth a look for its place in history alone, as well as for its memorable moments.

Among the many features demanding an audience is Andi Engels' political thriller with a difference, *Melancholia*. Its theme is the moral and political dilemma faced by an ex-ultra leftist German radical whose comfortable if angst-ridden life is shattered by an unexpected phone call. The central character, Jeroen Krabbe, played by David Keller is asked to put into action the pledges of his youth by carrying out the assassination of a Chilean torturer.

An interesting juxtaposition to the issues raised by the 'sixties revolution in Germany is Mark Kitchell's documentary *Berkeley in the 'Sixties*. Much more than just a nostalgic look at bygone radicalism, this documentary examines the impact of the civil rights, student and black movement by interviewing fifteen people who were actively involved at that time. Its significance for the Left is that the interviews dispel the well-worn myth that all 'sixties radicals turned into middle-aged yuppies. It shows that many people in fact remained committed to their ideals and lived them out through involvement in a whole range of politically motivated projects. The interviews are interspersed with fascinating archival footage of the demonstrations and the key political figures of the 'sixties including Martin Luther King, Huey

Newton, Ronald Reagan and features clips from Joan Baez and the Grateful Dead.

A devastating issue of the 'eighties and 'nineties is tackled in *Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt*. The directors, Robert Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman interviewed five individuals who subsequently died from AIDS. Through photographs, home movies and testimonials from friends, families and lovers, the film celebrates their lives and shows how those closest to them came to terms with their loss through involvement in the quilt project. It is said to be so powerful and moving that even those most distant from the reality of AIDS cannot help but be affected.

This year's program also includes several documentaries which focus on the lives and experiences of women in vastly different cultural contexts. Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* promises to be as fascinating and unusual in its unconventional approaches to the documentary form as its theme. Trinh T. Minh-ha has gained a reputation for innovation for her unusual camera techniques, her use of subtitles, quotations and staged interviews in questioning the notion of truth which is a central concern to independent documentary filmmakers.

In this documentary she focuses on women from her own country and their experiences as Vietnamese women, and women living as exiles in America. Much more than just a 'factual' documentary, *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* has been described as "a raw sensual and emotional experience" which conveys the displacement of women in their own and their adopted country.

Half the Kingdom is a documentary about seven Jewish feminists and their attempts to incorporate a feminist perspective into Judaism. The directors, Francine Zuckerman and Roushell Goldstein gathered together a diverse group of extremely articulate women including the novelist Esther Brouer and Shulamit Atoni, a member of the Israeli parliament. They discuss the ways in which women are challenging traditional roles as they search to claim their half of the kingdom. The film graphically depicts this struggle when a group of women come together to pray at Jerusalem's western wall while being harassed by ultra-Orthodox Jews.

Many more films and documentaries featured in this year's Melbourne Film Festival should at least rate a mention. According to Tait Brady, an important criterion for making the final choice of films has been to select those considered too rare and too uncommercial to gain a screening season even in the alternative cinema. He says we can be assured of a unique film feast and if this glimpse is anything to go by, who are we to doubt his word?

Martina Nightingale.



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Sydney

Those emerging stiff-limbed and bleary-eyed at the end of this year's Sydney Film Festival (June 8-22) will have had the opportunity to see a mouth-watering selection of new films from all corners of the world, including such diverse locations as Burkino Faso, South Korea and Iran. However, it is the emergence of both Eastern Europe and South America from years of dictatorship which is the strongest thread running through a program which contains a high proportion of films with political themes and references.

As in Melbourne, *Larks On A String* is among the most prominent of these, and should make an interesting contrast with *The Tender Revolution*, a hastily put together record of the events of November 1989. *Dekalog*, a series of ten one-hour films by Polish director Krzysztof Kieslowski, is less overtly political than either of these, but probably more arresting from a purely cinematic

point of view. Two of the ten films, which are all set in the same depressing apartment block in Warsaw, have previously been shown in feature length form, but the screening of the series will be one of the most eagerly-awaited events of the Festival.

Two West German films provide evidence that the imminence of reunification has done nothing to quell the obsession with the Nazi period. *The Trail of the Fathers* is the story of a young German's discovery of this father's part in the Ukrainian campaign in World War Two, while Michael Verhoeven's "viciously funny" *The Nasty Girl* examines the refusal of a small German town to come to terms with its past.

Argentina heads the South American contingent with *Secret Wedding* directed by Alejandro Agresti, the story of what happens to a 'disappeared' political activist when he unexpectedly re-emerges; and *Permission To Think*, a study of the Peron cult. Chile is also represented with a documentary, *Dance of*

Hope, featuring interviews with eight very different women whose relatives disappeared during Pinochet's rule. American films dominate among the documentaries. They include *The Price of The Ticket*, a biography of James Baldwin, the Oscar-winning *Common Threads - Stories From The Quilt* and *Mr Hoover & I*, an idiosyncratic study of the FBI chief by Emile De Antonio.

However, it needn't be a fortnight of unmitigated seriousness and heavy political content. Many people unable to afford either time or money to sit through the main festival will appreciate the availability of separate tickets for special nights of new British (June 13) and Scandinavian (June 20) cinema, Australian Short Films on June 8 and, above all, the two all-night shows. *Round Midnight* on June 16 features jazz on film, while Australian TV: *The First Decade* (June 9) should prove irresistible for many.

Mike Ticher

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James Baldwin - the Price of the Ticket: (USA) A film biography of a blazing talent with great archival scenes.

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