

"Madame de..." is superficially superficial

By Erich Roe

Next Wednesday's Academic film is so discreet and charming you could bring your grandmother—who has read only Harlequin Romances and watched reruns of Myrna Loy movies for the last 20 years—and she would find it "lovely, sad but lovely." There have been—and will continue to be—plenty of viewers and reviewers who dismiss Max Ophüls' *Madame de...* as a banal, overly stylized soap opera set among the Parisian turn-of-the-century upper class.

A general's pretty wife has a romance with a dashing Italian baron. The husband kills his rival in a duel and the wife dies of a broken heart. Earrings are passed around, symbolic of her love. The camera-eye ever so gently glides along beside the characters, sympathetic but never indulging in purely subjective sentiment, distant but never satirizing.

Madame de... doesn't try to hit us over the head with profundity as some films by directors like Herzog or Bergman do. But with graceful, subtle, unobtrusive and superbly economic determination, every frame, movement and phrase suggests significance and meaning. "Our marriage" ("happiness" in one version) "is like ourselves," says the general. "It is only superficially superficial."

A fortunate few critics have taken heed—and care to point out the film's depth and richness. Andrew Sarris, Molly Haskell and Peter Harcourt have listed it as their "favorite movie."

Harcourt compared it to Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Haskell wrote, "*Madame de...* represents the romantic incarnation of the liberated woman."

Sarris referred to a "character on the

wing, fluttering determinedly toward her doom across a world indifferent to her suffering, past people who unknowingly contribute to her romantic illusions."

Peter Ustinov wrote that Ophüls was "like a watchmaker intent on making the smallest watch in the world and then, with a sudden flash of perversity, putting it up on a cathedral."

Whatever is said about a work of art reveals at least as much about the critic as about the work. But that's part of the fun, "to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature." Ustinov was mostly wrong but perversely right in a way he probably never recognized. (He was equally misunderstanding in his role as ringmaster and Ophüls' alter ego in *Lola Montes*.)

Consider this scene which, in miniature, mirrors the movement of the entire film from light to dark, from airy social comedy to somber, personal tragedy: In one continuous sequence the camera moves synchronized with Madame de and Baron Donati as they waltz round and round from one ball to another.

At first they're in crowded company and snatches of irreverent dialogue are heard: I hear there's trouble in Montenegro and They'll soon straighten it out.

The melody stays the same but modulates to higher keys. "Four days without seeing you," Donati exclaims. "Two days without seeing you..." "Twenty-four hours without seeing you..." A sense of elegant vertigo accompanies the couple as they hold each other ever tighter and more affectionately, literally spinning out of control and together becoming ever more isolated.

After a dissolve they are revealed as the only dancers. The remaining musi-

cians are preparing to leave, a servant extinguishes candle after candle, then the screen is filled with a dark cloak which is put over a harp and fades out to black.

I've only managed a very rough description of an exquisitely controlled sequence. Ophüls seems to have worked it out to the smallest detail. For instance, "Montenegro" in a few (my guess) years was to provide the spark which began the First World War, the end of this excessively refined world of aristocratic Europe.

Ophüls' reconstruction of time is not "the smallest watch" but, as embodied in the camera movement and imagery, is an all-pervasive cyclical force which sweeps the dancers along. Ophüls simultaneously places it at a "superficially superficial" distance, which is not the product of a "sudden flash of perversity" but is for him the necessity of life. It is the "romantic illusions" his characters pile between themselves and the encroaching darkness, which both hasten their defeat and provide the definition of their folly and triumph—the meaning of their lives.

Madame de is first shown as a gloved hand which carelessly roams between lavish jewelry, gowns and furs while a voice chatters frivolously to itself. She chooses the earrings, her husband's wedding present, to sell to pay off some unimportant debt. The film ends when a slow tracking shot through a dim, empty church comes to rest before her tombstone. On it are the same earrings, now glowing with a somber quality acquired during Madame de's passage from vain, capricious society darling to romantically infatuated, tragic heroine.

Ophüls' visual language finally sug-



gests a nostalgic sympathy for the confining and beautiful illusions which facilitated such a passage.

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NOTES

LITTLE BUSINESS

A free day-long small business workshop will be offered Friday, May 9, by the Small Business Administration and Evergreen's Office of Career Planning and Placement. Call 866-6193 to register.

CPJ EDITOR WINS

Blonde and vivacious Pamela Dusenberry, Associate Editor of the Cooper Point Journal, has been awarded a fellowship grant to attend a 5-week intensive workshop entitled Media Evaluations Conference on Commercial Activity at the University of Denver this summer. Dusenberry, whose interests in both journalism and economics have propelled her through work in last year's Decentralization program and intensive study of economics all this year, has worked five quarters as one of the editors of the CPJ. Last summer she worked on Seattle's radical Northwest Passage and studied journalism at the UW. Although the Denver conference seems to be business oriented, Dusenberry is radically critical of the collusion between government and big business. "It pisses me off," she says, "that the press lets the corporate biggies get away with so much. I'm interested in journalism because I want people to know what's really going on in this country and whose making the decisions that affect their lives." Dusenberry eats meat, smokes cigarettes, drinks beer, and is 4'11".

I.F. STONE WEEK

Two rare chances to see and hear America's greatest radical journalist and political critic on film and radio! Monday, May 5, in Lecture Hall One, at 4 p.m. See the film I. F. Stone's Weekly (see description in Arts and Events calendar) Tuesday, May 6, at noon on KAOS radio (89.3 FM) hear the "studio-quality" recording of Stone's recent Seattle lecture! Stone, whose brilliance and articulate wisdom awed the 20 Evergreen students who attended the Seattle lecture, is 72 years old.

NATIONAL AWARD

David Neill, an Evergreen graduate has been awarded a Danforth Graduate Fellowship and becomes the third Evergreen alum to be so honored within the past five years. Neill is among 100 fellowship winners from throughout the United States. One of the few Danforth winners in natural sciences, Neill says he plans to complete the majority of his doctoral work in South America.

ROW YOUR BOAT

The first annual Squaxim Island Rowing Regatta and Square Dance will take place on May 10 on Squaxin Island. Tickets are \$2 for the race and the dance and \$1 for transportation to the island for those who do not have a boat and need a ride. For information call Allen Levy at 866-8347.

COG IV D.T.F.

Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their college governance system. This is your last chance to volunteer to serve on the DTF which will review and revise Evergreen's governing documents—the COG IV DTF. Volunteer now and influence the future of Evergreen! Be prepared to meet weekly Spring and Fall quarters. Contact the President's Office.

ARTS EXHIBITS NEEDED

The Evergreen Senior Exhibit is scheduled for May 24-June 13. Deadline for entering work is 9 a.m., Tuesday, May 20. Entry and selection procedures will be announced shortly. Marilyn Frasca, Jean Mandeborg and Ford Gilbreath will serve as jurors.

GRC BENEFIT SHOW

Chris Tanner, a San Francisco singer/songwriter, headlines a benefit concert Saturday, May 10 at 8 p.m. in the Recital Hall of Evergreen's Communications Building. The Lyle Cruse Trio, an Olympia women's band, will also perform. A former member of Portland's Family Circus Theater, Tanner writes and sings his own creations, accompanying himself on piano. His concert is sponsored by the Gay Resources Center as a benefit for the Sexual Minorities Prisoners' Caucus at the Washington State Reformatory in Monroe.

UNCLASSIFIED ADS

ACTIVISTS NEEDED for the Survival Summer project, a nationwide grassroots mobilization on the arms race and related issues. Free training provided at regional centers during May-June. For more information, contact: Survival Summer, Mobilization for Survival, 3601 Locust Walk, Philadelphia, PA 19104. Phone (215) 386-4875.

Studio 403 looking for sub-lesser for bedroom w/loft and view of red bricks. Communal cooking available. Reasonable. Campus x5152.

Responsible couple will house sit for the months of June or July, do gardening and caretaking of plants and pets. Call Katie, 352-1298.

A weekend DREAM SEMINAR on Orcas Island Facilitator Wendy Schofield 16th through 18th of May

sponsored by the American Theosophical Society for further information call 866-4666

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