

Film

A PRIVATE FUNCTION

Director: Malcolm Mowbray

In 1984 Alan Bennett's witty and stylish *An Englishman Abroad* was one of the highlights of the television year and I'm willing to bet that *A Private Function* will prove one of the best films of 1985. On the big screen Bennett gives us a rather barbed slice-of-life in a post-War Yorkshire town, setting his comedy of class struggle against a forthcoming civic dinner to celebrate the 1947 royal wedding. Most of the mischief and machinations revolve around the furtive rearing of an unlicensed pig, "Betty", who will provide the main fare for the banquet. Bennett's script is tight and sharply focused on its satiric targets. It encompasses a wide range of humour, from the understated and affable bumbling around of Michael Palin's chiropodist to the broadly scatological play made on the animal's continence problems. The more boldly conceived characters register vividly, in particular Maggie Smith's local piano teacher and chiropodist's wife, with her constant yearnings for "the better things of life" and Denholm Elliott's oleaginous doctor who is equally determined to maintain his control of the town's social hierarchy.

Perhaps, in the final count, a few things don't work — the intended



Nicholas Cage, Matthew Modine in 'Birdy'.

parallels between the pig and Richard Griffith's distinctly porcine Allardye seem a little heavy-handed. By contrast, Bennett's script gives Smith's senile mother a broadness that is almost Dickensian.

It seems very appropriate to evoke the name of the Victorian novelist, for *A Private Function* is very much a comedy of character and, as such, is written with a good deal of edge and perception. The star is indubitably Maggie Smith, whether launching into Elgarian strains on the parlour piano under the influence of a few too many sherrys, shrieking "Da Capo Veronica!" to divert the attentions of a piano pupil or becoming a North Country Lady Macbeth, goading her husband into slaughtering the pig in the bathroom.

BODY DOUBLE

Brian De Palma

Body Double has caused as much controversy as the director's earlier *Dressed To Kill*, with its unsettling mixture of sexism and violence. Certainly, the murder of Deborah Shelton with an electric drill does come across as excessively sadistic, especially when a carefully set up camera angle shows the drill emerging from between the victim's thighs like a giant phallus. Yet *Body Double* is very much keyed into the vicariousness that runs through our modern society, coupled with our reluctance and/or inability to make decisions and act upon them.

If De Palma's film seems cynical then it must be seen as a reflection of the more general social malaise, an attitude reflected in the short extract from the video of Frakie Goes To Hollywood's 'Relax'. It is a critique, not a celebration and what could be a singularly bleak vision is offset by the dashes of offbeat humour and fresh unaffected performances by both Craig Wasson and Melanie Griffith.

The publicity for *Body Double* describes De Palma as "the modern master of suspense" and there are many echoes of Hitchcock: the central voyeurism theme recalls *Rear Window* and Wasson's obsession with Shelton parallels that of James Stewart with Kim Novak in *Vertigo*. In *Body Double* the hero's fatal flaw is his claustrophobia rather than the fear of heights which plagued Stewart. *Body Double* also surveys the quirky details of latter-day LA with a Hitchcockian eye for the bizarre,

from Beverley Hills lingerie boutiques to the outer limits of porno sleaze.

BIRDY

Director: Alan Parker

Alan Parker's new film is built on what might seem an unlikely premise: a young man (Matthew Modine) who takes on the personality of a bird, eventually retreating into his own silent escape world in a military hospital. The action of *Birdy* is divided between Modine's and Nicholas Cage's teenage years in Brooklyn and their meeting years later in the hospital. In between came the Vietnam War, in which both had seen combat. As Cage's character remarks bitterly at one point in the film, "In any other war we'd be heroes."

Not only does the Vietnam issue ensure that the film deals with a world of contemporary realities, but *Birdy*'s treatment of the Man/Bird theme is not as literary as Peter Shaffer's *Equus*, nor as surreal as Robert Altman's *Brewster McCloud*. The film's more poetic flights of fancy are shrewdly balanced by the earthy humour of the flashback sequences, many of which are livened by Sandy Baron's irascible Jewish/Italian poppa.

Birdy is, above all, a study in the strength of friendship and loyalty in much the same way as Roland Joffe's *The Killing Fields*. This is as much the core of the film as *Birdy*'s quest for flight and the freedom which it enables.

William Dart

Off The Record

The Book Of Feeling (Various Artists, Pulp & Pigment Print)

For all those who collect one-off magazines which explore the bizarre; the real and unreal and probe behind all masks, *The Book Of Feeling* is a must. This publication takes the fanzine/alternative theme and pushes it to new limits of visual virtuosity. The book consists of various contributions by poets, artists, writers and musicians. Innovative use is made of the printing process; high quality art paper, cut-ups and fold-outs. The book is a beautifully tactile object. Themes explored include obsessions, fetishes, the media, sex and sound. There is a youthful honesty which is illuminating and disturbing. Contained within is an advert for the *Urgent Dispensary* soundcassette, which acts as a useful soundtrack as you read. The use of pure sound and noise is exhilarating. Both are available from selected outlets and Pulp and Pigment Print, PO Box 47-295, Auckland, for \$5 each. Buy it before they start burning it.

R. Kane

John Lennon, In My Life Pete Shotton and Nicholas Shaffner (Coronet, \$19.95) Loving John, the Untold Story May pang and Henry Edwards (Corgi, \$14.95)

Both the people responsible for these books knew John Lennon personally and very well, Shotton as schoolmate, fellow piss-freak and employee, Pang as assistant and lover. Between them they span 30 years of his life, give or take a month or two here and there, constructing a picture of my

onetime hero as a brilliant, extreme, lovable arsehole. A real mess of a man whose demise is almost acceptable as retribution for those callously treated in his self-absorbed past. Violent and full of hatred, he storms through these pages, using and manipulating those around him. If he hadn't been so stunningly brilliant and charming no one would have mourned him. Mind you, both authors believe his background formed him and Yoko kept him under both control and her thumb.

The Shotton book is fascinating, especially in its early stages, and has Shaffner's impeccable Beatle credentials behind it (he co-wrote *The Beatles Forever*, the best general Fab Four book so far). Shotton obviously loved John deeply.

Pang's book is more like a raunchy Mills & Boon but does ring true. If it's wholly true, Yoko's John's Mum and John was a baby. I dunno what I believe but it's food for thought. Shit-food. CK

Graham Sinclair Overcome Spike

From the colourful cover in, this is an enjoyable, meticulously attended project. Sinclair and friends have put together mostly short, concise pieces of music, often using altered orthodox sounds and voices. Parallels perhaps with a less sombre *This Kind Of Punishment*. Serves equally well as background music or actual listening stuff. Good value too, at \$7 (plus s.a.e.) for 85 mins, from Severely Limited, PO Box 6972, Wellesley St, Auckland 1. RB

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