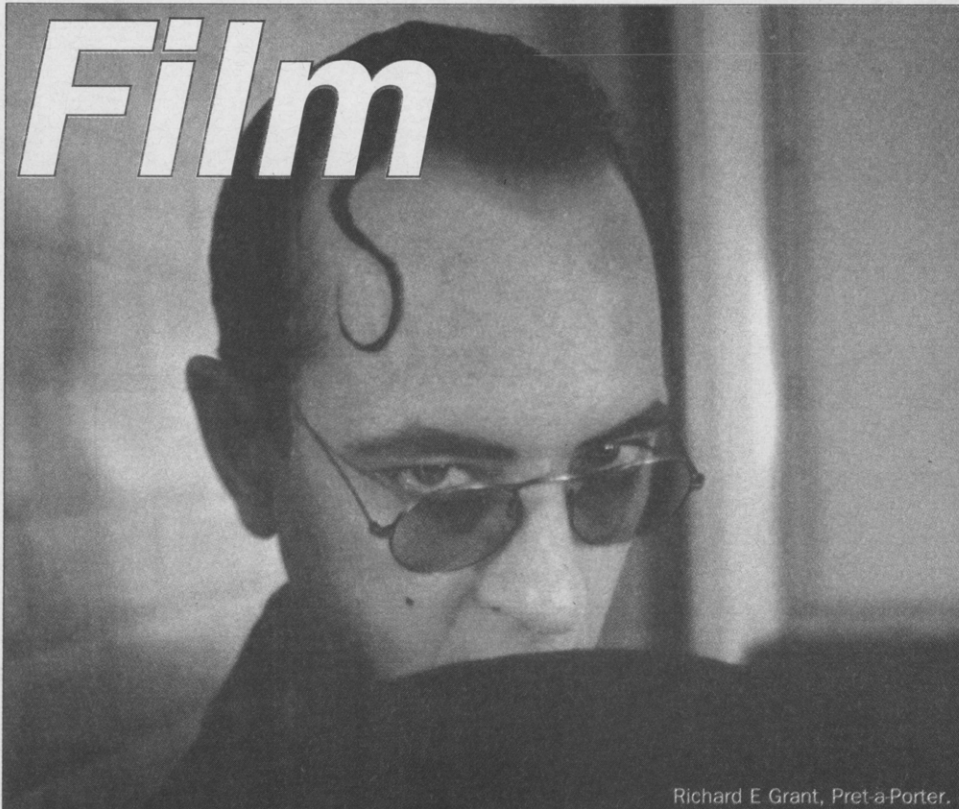


# Film



Richard E Grant, *Prêt-à-Porter*.



Flow Small, *War Stories*.

## Prêt-à-Porter Director: Robert Altman

Some years ago, the English actor Margaret Leighton expressed her concerns about films that were a delight to make, but which ended up limp on the screen. She was talking of Bryan Forbes' *The Madwoman of Chaillot*. I suspect some of the cast of Robert Altman's new film would echo her worries.

In many ways, it's Altman's own fault for setting such an unassailable touchstone in his 1976 *Nashville*. It's impossible not to judge *PaP* by the earlier film, especially when Kim Basinger's vacuous fashion reporter recalls Nashville's more finely conceived Geraldine Chaplin character, a gushing BBC reporter, given to waxing poetically in automobile graveyards.

At 133 minutes, *PaP* is too expansive by far, and the different plot strands, which linked so effortlessly in last year's *Short Cuts*, don't always gel. Some characters, such as Lyle Lovett's hatchet-faced Texan, have nothing to do, and Lauren Bacall, frankly, was funnier on *Larry King* being herself.

Yves Saint-Laurent, in his autobiography, pointed out the anguish of fashion writers ever trying to find a new word of 'new'. Some of the funniest moments of *PaP* show just this, whether it's Basinger gushing about "designers from the supernovas to the super nobodies", or the high-powered trio of editors (Linda Hunt, Sally Kellerman and Tracey Ullman) who run a smooth and highly competitive line in fashion-speak.

Altman never let cynicism taint *Nashville*; even the least attractive characters asserted their validity. *PaP* has too many moments of sheer malice from Stephen Rea's humiliation of Hunt and her colleagues to the one-dimensional treatment of gay characters — a surreptitious clinch Forest Whitaker and friends find themselves in wouldn't pass muster in a Doris Day comedy. Occasionally, though, Altman touches the heart: this happens with reunion of Marcello Mastroianni and Sophia Loren, resplendent in her 60s, who come together in a hotel room and replay a scene from De Sica's *Yesterday Today and Tomorrow*. One wonders what players like Bacall, Anouk Aimée and the rather jolly Teri Garr might have been able to contribute to the film with a little more coaxing.

WILLIAM DART

## War Stories Director: Gaylene Preston

Seven women talk movingly of their experiences during the war years, and how they coped with different kinds of grief. 'Character-building stuff,' some would say, and true enough; but these are stories that have been silent for too long and, thanks to Preston and her team, we can now learn from them. And what characters these women are: the rather gracious Pamela, letting her defences fall at just one crucial moment; the perennial battler Flo; Tui,

Preston's own mother, stoically talking of coping with a loveless marriage; Rita, revealing the ugly treatment meted out to conscientious objectors; and Auntie Jean, revealing the quiet racism that went unchecked in the countryside.

To inspire such utter naturalness in such a wide range of women is a testament to Preston's integrity. The interviews are unflinchingly full-on, even if the two Maori women sometimes have one straining to hear what they are saying, and Preston only allows herself the occasional cinematic flourish, such as a touch of slow motion at the end of one interview.

The archive footage today seems quaint to us — my favourite was the newsreel of the Eagle Club, an organisation of eager young Kiwi brides all ready to return to the States at the end of the war — but it's a crucial part of the film's structure. The clips cut ironically across the interviews, or they enlarge upon the women's comments, only occasionally causing confusion.

This is a film that stretches well beyond 1945. Here are seven women who have maintained their own life force, often in the face of terrible odds the world of men has laid against them. Their's is a wisdom we can all learn from, as the American feminist singer Holly Near once put it:

Listen to the voices of the old women,  
Calling out the message,  
Of the moon and sea,  
Telling us what we need to know,  
In order to be free,  
Listen to the voices of the old women...

WILLIAM DART

## The Secret of Roan Inish Director: John Sayles

John Sayles' new film is a slow burn — after a marvellous credit titles sequence, with a ship making the journey from island to mainland, there's an awful lot of what seems like inconsequential chatter. In fact, I well sympathised with the perplexed expression that often coursed over Jeni Courtenay's face through many of the early scenes.

But once we are taken into the mystical realm of the Selkie, a mythical Celtic who is half-human and half seal, the film picks up a force of its own. From then on, so powerful is the spell being woven, that even a cynic such as I accepted that two young children could single-handedly thatch and whitewash a deserted island cottage.

The bones of the plot come from a novel by Rosalie Fry, but the dialogue (and the observations that go with it) are by Sayles. Veteran cinematographer Haskell Wexler provides stunning images, from the amber-hued, flame-flickering cottage interiors to a toddler in its cradle, bobbing in the tide.

The performances are beautifully understated, and no-one really stands out from the Irish cast, although the quiet nobility of Cillian Byrne as the Selky lingers in the memory. Sayles' films are always very locked into a particular location and time — from his

early *Return of the Secaucus Seven* to his recent *Passionfish* — and this is no exception. In lesser hands, a film which advocates returning to live in the unspoiled wilderness of an offshore island might bring forth some sceptical chuckles, but in Sayles' hands, there seems to be no other alternative.

WILLIAM DART

## Bite-size Movie Treats Filmfeast 95

Short film lovers, or should I say lovers of short films, gird your loins for *Filmfeast 95*, a potential orgy of over 140 short films which will screen in Auckland from May 26-June 8, with other cities currently being negotiated. This year the energetic Charles Bracewell, aka Miz Ima Starr, is at the helm. His is a name known to many in the Auckland gay community for his fronting of bFM's *In the Pink* show, and nationally for his often trenchant writing in *Man to Man*.

Bracewell stresses that this year we're going to see a lot of what's going on outside of New Zealand: "There's a lot more overseas stuff and it seems to be of a higher quality. We have a number of award winners, including the Mexican film *The Hero*, which took off last year's Jury Prize at Cannes... a bit of a coup really!" He's also excited about four programmes of offerings from the prestigious Oberhausen Festival, spanning two decades, from directors including Jan Svankmajer and Werner Herzog. Bracewell feels "these put New Zealand film-making into a different and valuable context".

Overseas films may well tell us something about ourselves. "The Christchurch film festival is good because it's competitive. It means it's a bit of a knuckle-duster between New Zealand film makers," says Bracewell. "Ours, not being competitive, is able to show films alongside the best that the world has to offer. You can get some idea about what we're lacking and what we have that other people don't have."

Bracewell has worked as actor, writer and director and feels the short film is "like a sprint compared to a mile. It gives you the chance to do something very focused. It's amazing how many people cannot focus for 10 minutes. In a short film you can do something that has a very distinct flavour. The quick turnaround allows you to analyse your work faster. I think it would be better if film makers here were encouraged to make 10 shorts for the same amount of money they would use to make a feature."

Five weeks away from opening night, Bracewell and Jane McKenzie, the director of the Moving Image Centre, are still working through mountains of videos. They range from another instalment of Bepen's Ken doll animations (with the intriguing title of *A Few Good Ken*) to a collection of Kiwi trash films under the banner of *Mondo Zealando*. The latter includes what Bracewell describes as "the longest and lightest" film in the festival, Mike Asquith's *Timekeeper*, an S-VHS essay which may well out-Jackson Peter of *Heavenly Creatures* fame.

You'll have more instalments of the dark

side of Kiwi culture in Simon Raby's *Headlong*, a snappy little tale of the ultimate hitchhiker from hell. Mark Raffety's environmentalist fable *Wood*, has touches of black humour, but also packs a strong emotional clout. Prepare to be moved by Derek Stuart's *A Stitch in Time*, a documentary about the AIDS quilt movement — particularly wrenching when some family members talk about the discrimination and bigotry they've encountered.

One programme, *Queer from Ear to Ear*, focuses on gay material, and *Girls, Girls, Girls* is a collection of women film-makers on women's issues. Gender politics can be fun, as in Sandra Lepore's *Dessert: An End in Three Parts*, which has its heroine trying to choose between two lovers, symbolised by *Feuilleté aux Cérises* and *Cherry Donut* (the latter has a chest to die for!), and finally opting for neither. Amongst the many cautionary tales, Karryn de Cinque's *Michelle's Third Novel* shows how a knife in the toaster 'turns' on the novelist in suitably manic Marguerite Lingard style.

WILLIAM DART

## REEL NEWS

Quentin Tarantino's next directorial project will be a big-screen version of the American Sixties spy series *The Man From UNCLE*, in which he'll also act ... **John Travolta**, with his newly acquired 'hot property' status (thanks to *Pulp Fiction*), will be earning \$8 million in his next movie, a romantic comedy called *The Lady Takes An Ace*. **Sharon Stone** co-stars ... speaking of Stone, apparently her next film, *Last Dance*, bears a remarkable resemblance to the story Richard E Grant's character pitched to Tim Robbins' Griffin Mill in *The Player* ... **Pamela Anderson's** first major debut will be in a film called *Barbed Wire* ... **Johnny Depp's** next role (after his fabulous portrayal of 'the worst director in the world' Edward D Wood Jr. in the movie *Ed Wood*) is about the story of a man who thought he was the best lover in the world and the people who tried to cure him of this affliction. *Don Juan De Marco* reunites Depp with *Arizona Dream* co-star **Faye Dunnaway**, and they are joined by **Marlon Brando** ... Brad Pitt plays a cop on the trail of a serial killer in his next movie *Seven*. A cast and sling had to be written into his part after he slipped and put his hand through the window of a car ... **Hal Hartley's** newie is called *Amateur*. It is the tale of a post trauma amnesia victim (**Martin Donovan**) who is taken under the wing of a nymphomaniac ex-nun (**Isabelle Hupert**). Add a bunch of assassins on the trail of Mr Memory Loss, and you've got Hartley's most frantically paced film to date.