

On Screen

MY BRILLIANT CAREER, starring Judy Davis and Sam Neill; written by Eleanor Witcombe from the novel by Miles Franklin; produced by Margaret Fink; directed by Gillian Armstrong.

Sybilla Melvyn, eldest daughter of a care-less farmer and his well-born, once-beautiful wife, is determined to be somebody—a singer, a pianist, a writer—to have, as she writes in her schoolgirl notebook, a brilliant career. But young women in turn-of-the-century Australia were fated for marriage and a baby a year or a menial job like teaching other farmers' children to read and write.

Sybilla wins a reprieve from teaching when her grandmother invites her to while away the summer in relative splendor, during which time Sybilla still dreams of a career, but she does so in comfort: new clothes, dances, parties, her rough hands soaked in lemon water, her hair brushed by a maid. And in the course of this idyll Sybilla falls in love with Harry Beecham (Sam Neill), the young, handsome plantation owner neighbor who at first appears unattainable but soon becomes intensely attracted to her. The underlying sexual tension between them is frustrating and compelling.

Uncertain of her looks and social graces throughout most of the film, growing up homely in the shadow of a beautiful mother (everyone remarks how Sybilla didn't get her mother's looks; "pity" she is nevertheless quite certain what she doesn't want. When she is forced to return to her family, Beecham's aunt remarks that life will indeed be dull without Sybilla. She starts out the ugly duckling and ends up a graceful, independent swan; actress Judy Davis makes us believe every minute. With her broad, freckled face, masses of untamed hair and a defiance born of a secret conviction that she deserves more from life than she's getting—while at the same time believing that she is clumsy and unattractive and undeserving—Davis makes Sybilla genuine, likeable, awesome and heroic.

Written, produced and directed by women, based on the book (perhaps autobiographical) by Miles Franklin (actually Stella Maria Sarah Miles Franklin; she was 16 when she wrote *My Brilliant Career*, 22 when it was published in 1901), this film is no shrill polemic for feminism, but it is firm and true, honest and fine and gentle and every bit as brilliant as a young school-girl's dreams.

There are very few films I ever want to recommend without reservation; this is one of them. See it. If it means driving 60 miles in hard weather and a weak car, see it.

Judith Sims

HIDE IN PLAIN SIGHT, starring James Caan, Jill Eikenberry, Robert Viharo; written by Spencer Eastman; produced by Robert Christiansen & Rick Rosenberg; directed by James Caan.

In 1967, a Buffalo factory laborer suddenly found his two children incommunicado after the Justice Department relocated their mother and new stepfather, a mafioso turner of state's evidence, to another, unspecified part of the country.

In *Hide in Plain Sight* James Caan portrays the bereaved father, Thomas Hacklin, as stolidly as someone who's just lost a new pair of bowling shoes, and not had the fruit of his loins wrenched from his loving grasp. As Hacklin attempts to find his children, officious bureaucrats snub him at every turn, members of Con-



Davis & Neill: brilliant as a schoolgirl's dreams

gress lie to him, a contemptuous lawyer humiliates him, and the tire factory in which his family has forty-four years of combined service sacks him; we keep waiting—indeed, hoping—for him to explode, but he never does, a couple of halfhearted token acts of vengeance notwithstanding. Through all of it, Caan appears confused rather than infuriated, perturbed rather than anguished.

Confounding our expectations, he's infinitely more audacious behind the camera in this, his debut as a director. A couple of times—as when, at the end of the scene in which his ex-wife informs him that she's married the hoodlum paramour she'd earlier promised to give up, the camera pulls back across the street and traffic noise drowns out the dialogue—he seems to be trying very much too hard, for the movement makes no sense of any kind. Elsewhere, though, he accomplishes at least one striking juxtaposition when he cuts from a close-up of the blissful face of the schoolteacher with whom Hacklin's fallen in love to a close-up of his harried ex-wife's face as she whispers through a prison window to her mobster beau in such a way that one woman seems to become the other.

Aside from the generally listless performances, this picture is also impaired by a screenplay which assumes that the kids' feelings about being taken away from their father are of no interest. Between the time that they disappear and their reunion with Hacklin in the film's one emotionally charged scene outside an Albuquerque diner, we glimpse them but once, and then only very briefly.

Say what you will about *Walking Tall* having been lurid and manipulative—the remarkably bloodless and untouching *Hide in Plain Sight* would be ten times the film if it had a hundredth the passion and action of the former.

John Mendelssohn

SIMON, starring Alan Arkin, Madeline Kahn, Austin Pendleton; written by Marshall Brickman; produced by Martin Bregman; directed by Brickman.

Famous heretofore as Woody Allen's col-

laborator on the *Annie Hall*, *Manhattan* and *Sleeper* scripts, Marshall Brickman now begins his solo director-writer career with *Simon*, starring his old pal (they were once members of a folksinging group, the Tarrriers), Alan Arkin. Predictably, many critics have faulted Brickman because he isn't Allen—or because there are too many similarities, or not enough similarities. But never mind all that.

Arkin plays a university professor kidnaped by a mischievous, omnipotent "think tank" group of weirdo intellectual scientists-philosophers; to satisfy their twisted whim, Arkin is brainwashed into thinking he's an alien. In the process Arkin gets a showstopping routine—reenacting several million years of biological history, starting out as a plankton and evolving quickly through upright man (with sly-ape-&-bone homage to 2001).

Brickman manages to combine sweet optimism with intellectual cynicism, all the while taking potshots at the endless petty annoyances that make our lives so dreary and dreadful: Muzak, bad drivers, those strips of paper wrapped around motel toilet seats. Brickman also hits bigger targets, like the think tank itself (this one headed by Austin Pendleton, Machiavelli with an overbite and a leather jacket), television, academia and the military. And it has a nice happy ending. Enjoy.

Judith Sims

NIJINSKY, with Alan Bates, George de la Peña and Leslie Browne; written by Hugh Wheeler; directed by Herbert Ross.

After the success of *The Turning Point*, director Herbert Ross and his producer-wife, the former ballerina Nora Kaye, were able to raise money from a major studio to film a biography on Vaslav Nijinsky. But whereas *Point* was as wholesome as American corn bread, *Nijinsky* is as decadent as a hothouse truffle.

In many ways *Nijinsky* is *The Red Shoes* without the censorship which forced the impresario in the latter movie to drive a ballerina to her death instead of a danseur. In 1948 overt homosexuality was too scandalous for movies, but that's certainly not the case in 1980. But instead of using the

freedom to paint a valid, complex picture of Nijinsky and his need and love for both Serge Diaghilev and Romola de Pulsky, this movie reduces these three complicated people to cardboard puppets.

Only Diaghilev fares well, perhaps because Alan Bates is skilled enough to play between the simplistic lines, but George de la Peña as Nijinsky and Leslie Browne as Romola are both so outclassed by Bates I wanted to tell Bates to stop hurting the children. There can't be a tug-of-war for the body and soul of one man when the two opposing sides (Romola and Diaghilev) are so ill-matched.

Even without this emotional complexity, *Nijinsky* might have worked visually if Ross had been able to capture a sense of the times. Diaghilev's band of artists—from the painter Leon Bakst to the composer Igor Stravinski—were turning the art world upside down, but that revolution is missing. We never understand how these people were living on the edge of time and creating a whole new language that is still spoken in today's music and dance world.

The best thing that can be said about *Nijinsky* is that it's beautifully art directed, but this is hardly sufficient. For a film about passion, obsession, creation, madness and death, *Nijinsky* is painfully flat. Where is the flamboyant outrageousness of Ken Russell when we need it?

Jacoba Atlas

A SIMPLE STORY, starring Romy Schneider, Claude Brasseur, and Bruno Cremer; directed by Claude Sautet.

Marie (Romy Schneider) is Sautet's almost-40 heroine, and between her pregnancy that opens the film and a different pregnancy of hers that closes it, nothing much of dramatic import occurs. And that's as it should be, for this is a slice-of-life film that intentionally skims life's more mundane facets; in style, pace, and mood *Story* is like a grown-up *Peppermint Soda*. Marie drops her current lover, dallies with her former husband, tries to help a suicidal friend, and eats and drinks a good deal with an attractive group of friends—all in all, not bad company for two hours.

Robert L. Liebman

MISCELLANEOUS MISERIES

Die Laughing is so wretchedly execrable, so thoroughly unamusing, so disastrously devoid of charm one wonders who was foolish enough to pay for this nonsense. Jon Peters, the one who lives with Streisand, is the executive producer; Robbie Benson is the star, the co-writer, the co-producer and the songwriter, and what started out as a disarmingly sincere young man in *One on One* has turned into a cheap, sleazy trickster who should think seriously about giving up show business for something worthwhile, like pounding sand in ratholes.

A Small Circle of Friends has already been rightly panned in several national mags, but I feel compelled to add one more nail to the coffin. For those interested in the Sixties, see instead *The War at Home*, a documentary (featured in a recent *Ampersand*) that far outstrips *Small Circle* in emotion, nostalgia and political insight.

The Solar Film lasts eight minutes and wouldn't earn much more than a cursory glance if Robert Redford's name weren't at the top as executive producer. It's a lamentably jejune look at the energy crisis and the lucky old sun, and it's about as informative as a *Dick and Jane* reader.

Judith Sims