

Girl CRAZY



BY CONSTANCE ADLER

I. PAULINE KAEI

She is the great *babbe* of movie reviewers. Worshipers at the Kael altar should beware, however, of a peculiar tendency in her writing: when she writes about women, and especially about women's bodies, this grandmotherly type with the X-Acto critical mind tends to blow her cool, to lapse into throbbing hyperbole. Here are some choice bits from just the last few years.

REVIEW
OF
REVIEWERS
EXTRA!

"Vanessa Redgrave's smart, **ribald** Peggy Ramsay is the one with life. Redgrave has never been more **physically witty** than she is here in a scene where she's just sitting and talking and **rubbing her shapely leg**. She's fifty, and she's **never been sexier** or more spontaneous. The combination of **her size and the light in her eyes is enough to heat up the theatre**" (on *Prick Up Your Ears*).

"Barbara Hershey has a **luscious** presence here. She has a **sexual vibrancy** about her, and . . . it's easy to believe that her brother-in-law would become obsessed with her" (on *Hannah and Her Sisters*).

"After [Joanna Cassidy] meets the governor-general she lights up, and when they've become a pair and she looks at him **her smile is big and dazzling**. . . . She's a **sexual powerhouse**" (on *Club Paradise*).

"[Debra] Winger has **thick, long, loose hair** and a **deep, sensual beauty** in this movie . . ." (on *Mike's Murder*).

"[Melanie Griffith's] voice **keeps you purring with contentment**. . . . (Has anybody ever looked better in smeared lipstick?)" (on *Something Wild*).

"The tall, **goddessy, vaguely libidinous** Daryl Hannah . . ." (on *Legal Eagles*).

"Bette Midler has never before been so **seductive** on the screen. . . . (I think I'd be happy to watch an evening of Midler just doing her bobble-jiggle walks)" (on *Down and Out in Beverly Hills*).

Take my word for it: in the last two years of *New Yorker* issues I did not find anything about men in Kael's columns written with nearly such relish (although she does hold a small torch for Nick Nolte and his high cheekbones). Kael can be downright cruel in her treatment of boys who try to be pretty. I even found myself feeling sorry for Tom Cruise when she called him "such a Nautilized, dinky thing." And then she really let him have it:

"Cruise puts on a hotshot show that has about as much authenticity as Richard Gere's freaked-out display in 'Looking for Mr. Goodbar' . . . with his mousy voice and the way he overdoes poor insecure Vincent's anger. . . . He keeps flashing his big grin, but not to the effect desired" (on *The Color of Money*).

Male actors have to be Gielgudian to receive Kael's blessing, whereas a woman may be rewarded for being merely pretty or a "sexual powerhouse." Of course, Kael appreciates women who can act too, but she doesn't decimate them if they can't—as long as they're sexy. And Kael sometimes sounds as though she equates sexual presence with acting up a storm. Kael puts her appreciation in terms that sound astonishingly male-chauvinist-piggy. Imagine if a male reviewer, for example, were to use the classic reductionist gambit of Woman as Baby Doll:

"[Pamela Reed's] **big-eyed doll face** is so **pretty** here that you have to grin when you look at her" (on *The Best of Times*).

"At first sight, Patsy Kensit seems a **knockout. A blond dolly with babyish cheeks** and a **petulant mouth**. . ." (on *Absolute Beginners*).

Even better, Woman as Cutesy-pie Insect:

"[Isabelle] Huppert can play a **cuddlebug** (she's **delectable** when she goes to the bedroom window [naked] . . .)" (on *The Bedroom Window*).

Then there is the extraordinarily guyish Woman as Automobile metaphor:

"[Jessica Lange is] as confidently **sexual** as any American screen star past or present,

and **when this woman gets to shake her chassis it's some chassis**" (on *Crimes of the Heart*).

Sometimes all that cinematic girl flesh becomes a barely distinguishable blur:

". . . And the **ravishing** Lori Singer (she's like a teen-age Jessica Lange)" (on *Trouble in Mind*).

Certain predilections crop up repeatedly in Kael. Breasts in Bondage, for instance:

"For most of [*Peggy Sue Got Married*, Kathleen Turner is] supposed to be not quite eighteen. . . . It's especially tough for her, because she's a **womanly big woman poured into tight teen-age-schoolgirl dresses**."

"[Ellen Greene's] clothes look laminated to her body, which is so frail, narrow-shouldered, and tiny-waisted that you can't believe **the fleshy boobs that puff out of her décolletage**. . . . [She] is a **weird little wow**" (on *Little Shop of Horrors*).

My personal favorite appeared rather recently. It includes Breasts in Bondage, but, more important, it is also an example of the Hog-Calling School of Criticism.

"I kept wanting to see lanky Lonette stand next to the towering [Anjelica] Huston. Coppola doesn't grant us that diversion, but **we do get to see Huston in a series of sleeveless, tight late-sixties minidresses, and—ooooe—she's a harlot, she's a princess**" (on *Gardens of Stone*).

Ooooo? Does Kael *intend* to sound like a young sailor at his first striptease?

II. JOHN SIMON

Across town is Pauline Kael's obverse in the girl-craziness department. Simon, *New York* magazine's theater critic, is also obsessed with the way women look. He is far less talented than Kael, but the more important difference, of course, is that he doesn't like what he dissects.

There's one thing you've got to hand John Simon: the man has follow-through. In 1977 he wrote of Liza Minnelli:

"I always thought Miss Minnelli's face deserving—of first prize in the beagle category. . . . It is a face going off in three directions simultaneously: the nose always en route to becoming a trunk, blubber lips unable to resist the pull of gravity, and a chin trying its damndest to withdraw into the neck . . ." (on *The Act*).

Then *seven years later*, in his review of *The Rink*, he finished her off:

"There are also some unintentionally funny lines, such as Miss Minnelli's repeated complaint to Miss Rivera, 'You never once told me I'm pretty!'"

He likewise picked on Amanda Plummer through *three* productions before moving in for the kill in the fourth:

"No one in his right mind, I imagine, would expect physical comeliness, natural grace, or a rich aroma of femininity from Miss Plummer, which is why no one in his right mind would cast her as Eliza" (on *Pygmalion*).

But Simon specializes in tossing spears at the giants. He condemns them on a number of counts: age, excess weight and, more often than not, just plain ugliness. This last is something that Simon appears to view as a moral failing.

"Glenda Jackson is intolerable. Nina Leeds, O'Neill's idea of the eternal female, has to be, on some level, attractive. Quite aside from her age, Miss Jackson is not appealing in any part—face, body, or limbs—and moves as if she had only just been unyoked from a plow" (on *Strange Interlude*).

"Take Geraldine Page as the protagonist. . . . The actress, whose face now resembles a melting Charles Laughton mask. . . ." (on *The Madwoman of Chailot*).

Simon is almost never quick and merciful. In fact, his style of slaughter is often baroque in its bloodlust—its soaring, extended metaphors, its meticulous itemization of an actress's physical flaws:

"[Peggy Lee] is rather like a bleached sarcophagus placed upright on the stage. . . . She moves her iconic face as minimally as she does her body, and this combined with a speaking voice as flat and monotonous as her native North Dakota suggests the constrictions of plastic surgery or the restrictions of embalming" (on *Peg*).

"Semina de Laurentiis, formerly of *Nunsense*, whose distinguishing features are an overbite that must be cantilevered. . . ." (on *Have I Got a Girl for You!*).

Simon is an unashamed advocate of the Out to Pasture Movement. I can't help but wonder, though, how long he thinks cranky old reviewers should be allowed to

go on publishing their fusty tirades:

"Miss [Barbara] Cook, at 59, has nicely preserved her voice and visage, but has unfortunately seen fit to preserve also her girlish ways, which, given her Wagnerian girth, is a bad idea" (on *Barbara Cook: A Concert for the Theatre*).

"In the part of the sexy young Marie, Mia Dillon is neither sexy nor young enough. . . ." (on *Come Back, Little Sheba*).

"Dianne Wiest is too old, too plain, too unsexy for Maggie, who is incessantly hailed as a sex goddess" (on *After the Fall*).

Yet Simon, unlike Pauline Kael, doesn't like too much *woman* in his women. Instead he scolds them, wrinkling his nose like a catty aunt when an actress gets a little unladylike onstage.

"Patti LuPone, as Nancy, must convey both trashiness and nobility, yet manages only the first" (on *Oliver!*).

"But why was Sally Struthers. . . . cast as the meticulous, pernickety one, when she is grossly overweight and slatternly-looking?" (on *The Odd Couple*).

In his movie reviews for the *National Review*, Simon has the opportunity to rake and riddle film actresses as well. It's interesting to see where he and Kael disagree:

"And Bette Midler, with *her* endowments, should hold out for a genuine freak show rather than settle for Mazursky's version of it" (on *Down and Out in Beverly Hills*).

"Daryl Hannah remains a rotten actress and still looks like a linebacker in a Lorelei wig" (on *Legal Eagles*).

A few years ago, Simon actually tried to defend his piggish aesthetics in print:

"I believe that unless a major part on stage or screen explicitly calls for an unsightly person, it is better filled by a performer who is, besides being talented, prepossessing."

It must be a terrible burden for this beleaguered reviewer to have to watch these women—these dogs, these *cows*—stampede all over his beloved theater. Poor Simon has a real problem: He doesn't like 'em chubby, and he doesn't like 'em old. He doesn't like 'em flighty, and he doesn't like 'em bold. He doesn't like 'em prissy, and he doesn't like 'em sloppy. One begins to think he just doesn't like 'em. ☹