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By J. Hoberman

The New Age

Written and directed by Michael Tolkin

Produced by Keith Addis and Nick Wechsler

A Warner Brothers Release.
Opening September 16

The Satin Slipper

Written and directed by Manoel de Oliveira, from the play by Paul Claudel

Produced by Paolo Branco and Arthur Castro Neves
An MGM Release
At the Public Theater
September 14 through 27

Writer-director Michael Tolkin is some kind of cowboy—at least on Rodeo Drive. In *The New Age*, as in *The Rapture* and *The Player* (which he wrote), the former journalist positions himself atop the unbroken bronco of the L.A. zeitgeist. Tolkin always gets thrown, but it's a wild ride while it lasts.

An edgier, less secure, and more ethnographic social observer than Woody Allen, Tolkin has a measure of quick wit, a knack for the phrase du jour, and a spongelike ability to soak up atmosphere. In *The Player* and *The Rapture*, he had the added advantage of sniping at such ideological billboards as Hollywood hustlers and Christian fundamentalists. In *The New Age*, however, he inflates his relatively modest targets well past their bursting point.

Reconfiguring *Naked Lunch*'s hipster leads into a slick yupscale couple, *The New Age* stars Peter Weller and Judy Davis as Peter and Katherine Witner, two cold-eyed hypersophisticates in haute designer wardrobes. Playing a smooth master of the mind fuck who calls himself "half cool, but not really" and is saddled with a swinger dad (Adam Batman West!) even sleazier than he, Weller sets his dial to modulated anxiety and vamps. Judy Davis is an

even scarier zombie. Her clammy pallor accentuated by blood-red lipstick and a mass of damp ringlets, she seems drenched in Giorgio flop sweat.

It's one of the film's conceits that, despite their floundering marriage, the Witners are perfectly phased—they experience everything in tandem. Katherine's freelance design studio goes belly-up just as pressured Peter quits work at his talent agency, spewing self-actualizing vitriol like the Mount St. Helen's of psychobabble. Each having had a cataclysmic day, they decide to throw a party and, voilà!, *The New Age* becomes a svelte Fellini geek show. The Witners' neo-Deco pad is packed with an evil array of friends, lovers, and mystics on the make: "Did you know that in Chinese, the word for 'crisis' is the same as that for 'opportunity'?"

It only takes one knock for the propositioned Katherine to leave her own party. Afterward, the Witners find themselves on an existential cusp—both unemployed and living in the same house while carrying on separate affairs (that their dates involve distinct theme-music is used to comic effect). Thanks to the probing of their resident guru (Patrick Bauchau), they realize that their talents are "shopping and talking." The short-range solution is a mom-and-pop luxury boutique named Hipocracy, where the Witners can be surrounded by beautiful stuff and rich, if unpredictable, customers. ("For us, shopping here is like you shopping in Tijuana," one German tourist remarks.) The fantasy lasts until the first markdown; after that, the couple's friends shun their bad karma. Facing failure, the Witners exhibit a boundless capacity for self-pity: "We were born while the economy was expanding, now it's contracting and they don't need us."

Like these two dedicated followers of fashion (and the Ed Ruscha paintings frequently alluded to),

The New Age has an airbrushed, fetishized sheen and a taste for svelte, slashing angles. The movie means to skewer the Witners' material desires to those of the audience. It begins where a more self-consciously Brechtian flick would have ended—with a bald woman yoga teacher (L.A. performance artist Rachel Rosenthal) telling us to experience ourselves sitting. At its best, *The New Age* evokes uneasy laughter as a sort of screwball comedy populated by self-indulgently tormented clichés. But, as in *The Rapture*—where he could not help but wonder *what if these religious crazies are right?*—Tolkin seems stumped by indecision. Are the Witners surrounded by spiritual masters or neighborhood yentas? Should we be looking for or laughing at this om-sweet-om? Is a Tibetan suicide ceremony a touching affirmation or an absurd affectation?

Peter winds up cruising an orgy with "the usual art and spirituality and s/m crowd"—the mood of lugubrious voyeurism and mortified sin suggesting a night spent in the company of Michelangelo Antonioni or a visit to Madame Tussaud's—even as Katherine finds herself sitting around the campfire for some sort of goddess rite. As Tolkin cuts back and forth between the two adventures, each Witner is freaked out and beats a confused retreat. So too, the film. A far more cynical (not to mention delirious) vision of mad paganism and Hollywood intimations of the apocalypse may be found in last week's Warners release, *Rapa Nui*. Indeed, as *Rapa Nui* knowingly teeters on the verge of self-parody, so *The New Age* naively trembles on the brink of self-importance.

Compelled back together, the Witners search for closure—along with Tolkin. "Why don't you get in touch with your inner adult?" Katherine whines at one point. That's not the filmmaker's problem. Too responsible or too terrified

to stick with satire, he lets *The New Age* dither into ambivalence. The movie isn't as daring as *The Rapture*, but Tolkin is no less tangled up in weirdness by the time he loses his balance and gets dumped on his seat in the dust.

A more epic "new age" opens this week when the full seven-hour version of Portuguese director Manoel de Oliveira's *The Satin Slipper* has its local premiere at the Public Theater. De Oliveira has argued that cinema is a technology for preserving theater; with *The Satin Slipper*, he's used cinema to midwife as well as embalm, filming Catholic symbolist Paul Claudel's vast, enigmatic, all but unstageable drama of imperial ambition and impossible love.

The Satin Slipper begins with the suitably grandiose declaration that "the scene of this play is the world" and then sets about making it literal. Set in the 16th century and concerning, usually tangentially, the multidecade affair between conquistador Don Rodrigue and the aristocratic Doña Prouheze, the action hops from Spain to North Africa to Japan to Sicily to the Rousseau-like American jungle (as well as all seas in between), events spiraling out from the tale of unconsummated—ultimately religious—passion like the stars of a distant galaxy.

Highly stylized, populated by an assortment of celestial creatures as well as swashbuckling Spaniards, *The Satin Slipper* was written between 1919 and 1924, overlapping the period during which Claudel served as French ambassador to Japan (and studied Noh drama). De Oliveira effectively puts this theatricality in italics. A series of stagy two-shots or posed tableaux, with actors typically declaiming toward the camera, his version of *The Satin Slipper* never pretends to be anything other than a filmed play. The effect is not so much theater canned as theater twice removed. De Oliveira documents stage artifice as though it were nature. (One crucial scene is dominated by the motorized blades of a painted windmill on the flat set.) The deadpan performances, long takes, and absence of cross-cutting accentuate the atmosphere of frozen pomp.

An initially light and fanciful medieval flavor gives way to a baroque, self-conscious narrativity. Crucial events are represented only through language. The presence of invisible forces and the sense of an implacable destiny are embodied by both the Catholic dream "to unite all humanity" and the letter from Prouheze to Rodrigue that travels, unopened, around the world. De Oliveira's images grow increasingly beautiful and the narrative more compelling as *The Satin Slipper* spins into its final movement (shown as an autonomous film during the 1985

Film

New York Film Festival), which is played out entirely at sea. Free-floating theatricality is raised to the level of mass delusion: As the Spanish armada sails toward England, its success a given, the king of Spain commissions an actress to play Mary Stuart and tempt the arrogant Rodrigue with the promise of the English throne.

De Oliveira remains astonishingly active at age 86, but *The Satin Slipper* represents the summit of his art, ranking with such earlier, hyperliterary evocations of frustrated passion as *Doomed Love* (1978) and *Francisca* (1981). It seems perverse for the Public to have scheduled this presentation at the hectic start of the fall season, but the movie, like the play, is intended to upstage your life—it's the aesthete's nightmare, an incalculable masterpiece. ■