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Moviemaker and his medium: Robert De Niro as Monroe Stahr as Irving Thalberg, and glorious ghosts of the past.

A Stahr Is Reborn

By Andrew Sarris

(THE LAST TYCOON.) Produced by Sam Spiegel and directed by Elia Kazan, screenplay by Harold Pinter based on F. Scott Fitzgerald's last novel, at Cinema 1.

My dear reader is advised not to read beyond the first sentence of this critique, but rather to rush off to see *The Last Tycoon*, then to read or reread the unfinished novel of the same title by F. Scott Fitzgerald, edited and with a foreword by Edmund Wilson, and finally to turn to the remainder of this review. In my capacity as a consumer consultant, I consider *The Last Tycoon* eminently worth supporting if we are to preserve a literate cinema in the English language.

At the very least, the combined talents of Elia Kazan, Harold Pinter, and Robert De Niro can be credited with having brought Fitzgerald's Monroe Stahr to life (and imminent death) on the screen without defacing his portrait of the man. Much of the irony, subtlety, and ambiguity of the book finds its way into the movie, with none of the flagrant editorializing that characterized the recent version of *The Day of the Locust* and none of the fussy embalming of *The Great Gatsby*. The picture has problems, to be sure, but they are the kind of problems that arise from intelligent choices made within a narrow range of possibilities. I must confess that *The Last Tycoon* has never been my own dream project, largely because the Irving J. Thalberg legend never impressed me all that much. Nonetheless, I enjoy the prospect of matching wit and interpretations with Kazan and Pinter, two artists I respect for their canny, often kinky, perceptions.

From the outset the film dispenses with Fitzgerald's oblique narrative device of discovering Monroe Stahr through the worshipful eyes of Cecilia Brady, the daughter of Stahr's partner, Pat Brady. Kazan and Pinter choose to discover Stahr through a reverse-cut Pirandellian relationship between the moviemaker and his medium. The first image we see on the screen is a movie-within-a-movie, black-and-white footage in jarring contrast to the color footage that is sure to follow. The '30s "stars" are impersonated by Jeanne Moreau and Tony Curtis, with vague intimations of Garbo and Gable, but the vibes are all wrong. Stars tended to be much younger in the '30s than they are in the '70s, but they behaved on the screen as if they were much older. The style of the mock footage is floridly Germanic—more post-*Kane*, post-*Casablanca* '40s than crisply edited '30s. And the antitelevision wide-screen ratio is all wrong for the '30s, when movies themselves were the television of their time.

Kazan and Pinter had other options. They could have used real footage from the period and studded the script

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with references to real stars. The risk in this procedure was that Stahr himself would be submerged by the glorious ghosts from the past. The old Hollywood is dead, gone, beyond resurrection, and the easy nostalgia of old movies is no valid substitute. Similarly, the laborious reconstruction of a '30s style might have been tactically wrong for a '70s audience, even if such a style were within the capabilities of post-'30s types like Kazan and Pinter. What we get instead is a one-on-one relationship between Stahr and his own silver screen. What we are actually seeing is not movies within a movie, but rushes within a movie, mere pretexts for displaying a producer's taste, authority, and unlimited power.

Kazan and Pinter do not take up Fitzgerald's suggestions in his notes for an extension of the novel into the realms of industrial politics to the point of crime and murder. Instead, Stahr is allowed to dissolve into the dark labyrinth of another time and another place after having experienced the tragedy of trying to live out his movie maxims in real life.

The core of both the novel and the film is Stahr's soft-focus romance with a young girl who comes floating magically and mysteriously on the head of Shiva, in an unprogrammed studio flood. Fitzgerald was torn between demystifying and romanticizing this girl in his novel and his notes, and this conflict in his own sensibility was the key to much of his ambivalence toward Hollywood. Edmund Wilson's introduction to the novel entirely misses the point of Fitzgerald's involvement with the film industry and with the characters in the novel. Wilson, a certifiable cinephobe and severe critic of the presumably more frivolous, less socially significant, side of Fitzgerald's nature, treats *The Last Tycoon* as if it were an Upton Sinclair tract on the abuses of meat packers.

But Fitzgerald himself has used the novel as a means of exorcising a very poignant self-hatred. Thalberg's partner was actually L. B. Mayer, another Jew, not an Irishman like Pat Brady. Brady's daughter, Cecilia, is very much an emotional surrogate for Fitzgerald's own daughter, to whom he wrote so many self-justifying letters. Also, there

is a great deal more written about Stahr's treatment of writers than his treatment of directors and players. Finally, there is the matter of the two plane trips from East to West and from West to East which frame the novel and which are never mentioned in the movie. These particular trips were more Fitzgerald's than Stahr's. The whole transcontinental business could not have been a happy one for Fitzgerald. In the West he was degraded by the power of Thalberg and his fellow moguls; in the East he was demeaned by the glory of Hemingway. Fitzgerald yearned for both the power and the glory. He understood the cinema as few writers of his rank ever did, but he was never given the opportunity to exercise his expertise. In an industry where writers were instructed that a simple yes or no would suffice, Fitzgerald's eloquent Yes, but . . . went completely unappreciated at the watering holes of both the Brown Derby and the Algonquin.

Fitzgerald's worship of Stahr is thus painfully reminiscent of Shaw's worship of Mussolini for getting things done. Whether one made films finish on schedule or trains run on time, one was sure to earn the admiration of self-doubting intellectuals, particularly a man like Fitzgerald, for whom character was action (when writing *Gatsby*) and action was character (when writing *The Last Tycoon*). Most serious film historians hold Thalberg in contempt for what he did to Eric Von Stroheim over *Greed*. In the late '20s, he was openly patronizing to Griffith for being out of tune with the jazz age. Yet he made Metro the most genteel of all the studios. His success consisted largely of cleaning out the shadows and dark corners of his own studio's output, both literally and figuratively.

Kazan and Pinter preserve this particular insight of Fitzgerald into Stahr's (and Thalberg's) deeply felt commercial preference for so-called nice girls over so-called whores. Metro, alone of all the studios, had a great lady tradition—from Shearer (Thalberg's wife) to Garson to Kerr. Ingrid Boulting's Kathleen, in the movie, preserves the fateful Irish connection to Fitzgerald's own fantasies, and Kazan and Pinter go all out to make the romance vivid to modern audiences. In the process, they lose contact with the repressive romanticism of the '30s as they introduce a modern woman that Fitzgerald could only have dreamed of in that era. De Niro is right for the time. Somehow he has willed himself into the part, though I have heard some complaints that he is more generally Mediterranean than specifically Jewish. Still, he manages to express the volatile mixture of dignity and vulgarity of the numbingly nouveau-riche tycoon. A workaholic before the disease had even been diagnosed, a dictator (like the others of his time) with a romantic sense of his own destiny, a philistine with the certitude of a saint, De Niro's Stahr dominates every scene in *The Last Tycoon*. Even Jack Nicholson's showy cameo as a Communist organizer of Hollywood writers merely illuminates Stahr's suicidal despair after his Kathleen has vanished into the mists of otherness.

The little ripples of recognition from such old-star turns as those of Robert Mitchum (as Brady) and Ray Milland (as a cost-conscious lawyer) soon lapse into odd cases of miscasting. Mitchum, particularly, seems inappropriately set up as the hypocritical establishment patsy.

It is all De Niro's show, and Kazan's and Pinter's, as they transform *The Last Tycoon* into a sustained Hollywood hallucination. The audience is drawn into the spectacle by a modern frankness about moment-to-moment existence coupled with an absurdist elusiveness about ultimate meanings. It is unfortunate that neither Ingrid Boulting nor Theresa Russell (as Cecilia) is electrifying enough to make the Kazan-Pinter-De Niro fantasizing sufficiently magical. Under these circumstances, the film seems somewhat deficient in not probing the possible issues of a power struggle more closely. It is the problem of plot once more. We can never know if Fitzgerald would ever have solved it in his finished novel. He seemed to be shamed by Wilson and the other Marxist influences back East into the most lurid melodrama, but he was also driven by a romantic tendency which is more fashionable in the '70s, when Fitzgerald is in and Hemingway is out, than it was in the '30s when the reverse was the case. Kazan and Pinter have captured some of this fertile romanticism, but they seem to have been very tentative about the rest. *The Last Tycoon* thus contains many beautiful pearls of scenes from Fitzgerald, but the string that ties them together has been mysteriously severed. Only De Niro holds everything in place with an evocation of period gallantry.

In the final analysis, Kazan and Pinter and De Niro are overwhelmed by the cumulative pathos in the successive deaths of Thalberg, Stahr, Fitzgerald, and Hollywood itself. Even in the blazing sunlight the characters parade like ghosts. I like the movie of *The Last Tycoon* for not rationalizing the painful feelings of Fitzgerald with condescending satire at the expense of the movie colony. I like the homely details of what it is like to be alone and adrift through the darkening evening of the soul. What I miss are the social cross-currents among characters who are truly alive rather than mere memories of what once was or might have been. There are no fun and games, only misty reveries. Within these limits, *The Last Tycoon* is an accomplished film. □