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PICASSO GOES CAMPING

Seth Cagin

The Adventures of Picasso . . . and a Thousand Loving Lies

Directed by Tage Danielsson

Written by Danielsson and Hans Alfredson

Used Cars

Directed by Robert Zemeckis

Written by Zemeckis and Bob Gale

Make Room for Tomorrow

Directed by Peter Kassovitz

Written by Kassovitz and E. Pressman

The Adventures of Picasso is the comedy equivalent of a soft core porno film with classy pretensions. Its humor is typified by an opening title card announcing that the film was shot in a studio in Hollywood . . . Sweden. That the film is composed of hundreds of similar unremarkable gags doesn't elevate it. That it takes as its inspiration the life and times of Pablo Picasso, however, lends it the veneer of cultural respectability, and therein lies its appeal. In the same way a Laura Antonelli movie delivers eroticism to audiences too genteel to visit porno houses, *Picasso* delivers silliness to people who are too sophisticated to enjoy a Monty Python flick.

The authors of *Picasso*, Hans Alfredson and Tage Danielsson (Danielsson directed), actually sound like a Swedish Monty Python. Although this is their first American release, they are responsible for a number of films that employ a stock company of actors, as well as radio and television programming and books and newspaper articles. Like Monty Python, Alfredson and Danielsson specialize, at least this time around, in one-liners, sight gags and slapstick, and in making wholesale cultural references with an eye to reversing our most passive expectations of them.

What is objectional in *Picasso*, despite its giddiness, is the nature of its compact with the audience. Monty Python, however dumb, never congratulates its au-

dience for being in on its joke. Even when Python spoofs are enhanced by a viewer's familiarity with the source material, say, the Bible or Arthurian legend, the skits take off on their own.

Picasso, on the other hand, is full of cultural name-dropping. The film introduces a character named Apollinaire who behaves doperly, reciting inanities, and that alone is supposed to be funny. We see a character remove his ear, and the joke is that he's Van Gogh. Even places and language itself are exploited in this way. The film cuts to a set representing Paris and asks to be rewarded with a laugh for using visual cliches that make it recognizable. French, Spanish and Russian characters speak pidgin talk throughout the movie — a good measure of how *The Adventures of Picasso* belabors its gimmicks.

Those who accept such jokes in the first place may not mind their camp exaggeration, but those who respond best to the film's physical and visual humor are bound to be frustrated by *Picasso's* frantic, uneven pace. Gosta Eckman, who plays Picasso, has a sweet Chaplinesque quality, and he's a lively mime who times his pratfalls well.

Throughout the film there are clever sight gags and nice bits of comic staging. But invariably good moments are rushed off the screen before they're played out, while each of the film's few extended skits falls flat. You're either being bombarded — You don't like Apollinaire? How about Rousseau? Or Hemingway? Or Gertrude Stein? — or bored to tears.

In one interminable sequence *Picasso* hides French partisans from German soldiers during World War II. The sole joke, repeated over and over, is that the Germans fail to spot people hidden in plain sight; that Picasso's father is the German commandant is just another example of the film's willingness to do anything — however irrelevant — for a laugh.

Desperate comedy, in the end, is not funny but sad. There is a prevailing emptiness at the center of this movie, which utterly exhausts a rich vein of material without once penetrating it. People may laugh as *The Adventures of Picasso* unfolds hysterically before them, but I, for one, walked away from it feeling depleted.