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# films in focus

by Andrew Sarris

"THE MILKY WAY" (at the 68th Street Playhouse) happens to be Luis Bunuel's second farewell film, his first having been "Belle de Jour," and his third adieu still shooting with Catherine Deneuve. As he passes his 70th birthday, Bunuel must be struck

by the irony of circumstances that forced him into inactivity for 15 long years (1932-1947) when he was presumably at his prime, and then resurrected him commercially in 1961 (with "Viridiana") to the extent that he has become one of the most eminently employable directors at a time when most of his colleagues don't know where their next project is coming from.

As entertainment, "The Milky Way" is marvelously light-hearted without being light-headed. As a take-off on and put-down of Catholicism through the ages, it is remarkably warm and generous in its treatment of organized absurdities. In describing the odyssey of two vagabonds (Paul Frankeur and Laurent Terzieff) across the historical and geographical landscape of Catholic Europe, Bunuel moves from motorcars to medievalism without any undue fuss as if old obsessions still lurked in all the dark crevices of modern technology. Indeed Bunuel transcends the elementary antipathies of anticlericalism and the banal satire of sacrilege by involving and even implicating himself in the utterances and actions of every inquisitor, every heretic, every blasphemer who ever breathed an idiosyncratic breath. For Bunuel, religious history — if not all history — comprises a cacophonous symphony of spiritual pluralism. Man, in

Bunuel's view, is the sum of men's individual obsessions.

"The Milky Way" is nonetheless relatively minor Bunuel in the context of his recent resurgence. "Viridiana," "The Exterminating Angel," "Simon of the Desert," and "Belle de Jour" are all more firmly structured and more clearly focused than "The Milky Way," which, by contrast, falls somewhere between a stunt and a tour-de-farce. Miraculously, it never becomes turgid or even self-indulgent. Bunuel's art possesses too much discipline and compassion for even the slightest suggestion of insensitive giddiness. Thus "The Milky Way" partakes in the truest sense of the sacred seriousness of art, and therein lies its humor and charm. The best way to enjoy it is to relax and let it cast its spell at its own pace and on its own terms. On the surface, it tends to incite laughter from the more skeptical Catholic sensibility, most obviously in the sequence explaining transubstantiation through a gourmet cook's analogy with a cooked rabbit. But the marvelous calmness of Bunuel's style is ultimately more profound than the content of religious controversies, even on that rarefied level on which Jesuit and Jansenist jostled in that distant age when the world was still empty enough for both God and the devil.