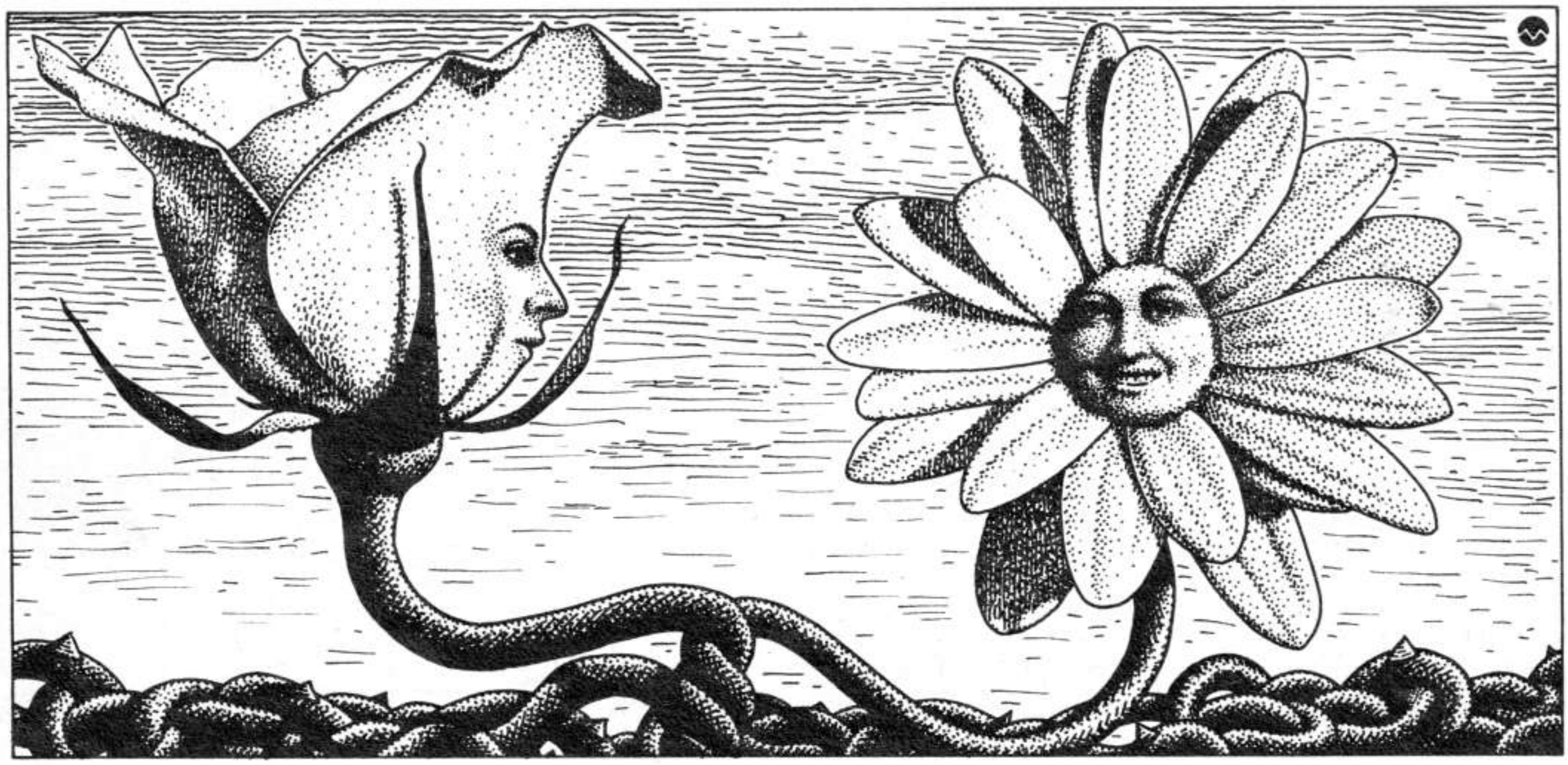
Document Citation

Title	**Women's place - in the sun at last**
Author(s)	Molly Haskell
Source	*New York Magazine*
Date	1977 Sep 26
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	58-60
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	L'une chante, l'autre pas (One sings, the other doesn't), Varda, Agnès, 1977

Movies / Molly Haskell

WOMEN'S PLACE— IN THE SUN AT LAST

"...Varda's *One Sings, the Other Doesn't* is a graceful mixture of feminist fiction, musical comedy, and social documentary..."



Ending a long dry spell for moviegoers, the fifteenth New York Film Festival begins September 23. It will extend until October 9 and sideways, with special afternoon programs for the first time in years. Recently, whether because of critics' complaints or budget cutbacks, the festival has restricted itself to a single main event. This year there will be a retrospective of ten rare American films as well as an animation series. Retrospectives are an important part of film study and preservation, and this one, made up of films submitted by the country's leading archives, will include the famous *It* with Clara Bow, a new 35-millimeter print of *Dodsworth*, the Jeanne Eagels version of *The Letter*, and Garbo's first American film, *The Torrent*. It will be like old times for those of us critics and enthusiasts who take a perverse pleasure in spending the last glorious days of Indian summer in the darkness of Alice Tully Hall, emerging only to carbo up (if I may borrow my friend Marvin's phrase) between showings.

With new films by Buñuel, Truffaut, Herzog, and Bertolucci's eagerly awaited *1900*, this one looks promising on paper. It's too soon to call it a clear winner, but I'm willing to go halfway toward any eccentricities the committee may have in store for us, on the basis of its opening-night gift—Agnès Varda's **One Sings, the Other Doesn't.**

With this graceful mixture of feminist fiction, musical comedy, and social documentary, Varda does for the spirit of sorority what the films of Renoir and Truffaut have done for the spirit of fraternity. Part folk idyll, part anthem, *One Sings, the Other Doesn't* is a seismograph that charts the upheavals in the lives of two women friends from 1962 to 1976, and through them the tremors of the women's movement.

At last, I would say—were I given to the exclamatory blurb—*the film* we've been waiting for! But I'm not given to such locutions—it's not my style, and I don't believe that there is any such thing as an all-purpose film for which a homogeneous and collective "we" have been waiting. "We" are too different, too divided among and within ourselves. And likewise film.

As a critic identified with the women's movement, I've spent a good portion of the last five years lamenting the disappearance of women from movies and suggesting that perhaps some, just some of the male-action and buddy-buddy films might make way for a cinema more responsive to women. When asked for specifics, I demur. I waffle. I refuse to answer. Once you draw up a bill of particulars, you are prescribing, and when ideology begins to legislate art, art is sure to be the loser. Hence, my insistence on identifying myself as a film critic first and a feminist second.

Those of us who care about film as film and not just as an instrument of consciousness raising know we are demanding the impossible: a woman-oriented film that is also formally interesting; a film that would criticize existing values while suggesting alternatives; that would present woman as victim (i.e., truthfully) and as victor (i.e., hopefully); a film that would challenge and exhort but also please and delight; that would acknowledge man's central responsibility in the current state of affairs without making him the central character; and that would compel the attention of a general audience while appealing primarily to women.

One Sings, the Other Doesn't achieves the impossible. It is first-rate feminist art. But here's the rub: It is often most hauntingly effective when it

Illustrated by Marvin Mattelson

is least overtly feminist.

The two heroines, as played by Thérèse Liotard and Valérie Mairesse, are striking in their own right and as contrasting types of women. Suzanne (Liotard) is frail, somber, beaten down, a mother of two at 22, and living with a photographer who can capture her beauty in photographs but is incapable of sharing the burdens of life. Paulette, a cherubic redhead just on the other side of adolescence, is confident, brash, talented, a survivor. A pop singer (witty lyrics courtesy of Varda) and instinctive rebel, she finds support for her impulses in sixties radicalism, while Suzanne, five years her elder, must fight for every inch of self-esteem.

Paulette represents a break with the past, as Varda makes clear in the opening scene. Having recognized the photograph of Suzanne among Jerome's portraits of women, she enters the gallery. She is appalled by the uniform look of sadness on the women's faces, their desolation. Standing among these dolorous black-and-white earth mothers, Suzanne, with her vivid coloring and schoolgirl frankness, is a rebuke to Jerome and to the vision of women that he presumes to define.

"I wait until they stop posing," he says in self-defense, "and take them as they are." But the famous Simone de Beauvoir phrase with which Varda has introduced the film—that women "are not born but made"—suggests that these women are not "as they are" but as Jerome has made them. Significantly, when he tries to photograph Paulette, he cannot get her right. She is too much her own person. Nude, she is more fully clothed, more mysterious than his archetypal women of mystery.

Following a tragedy—a stunning dramatic moment in the film—the two women who have come together go their separate ways, communicating through postcards and an imaginary dialogue. There are brief reunions while each seeks and creates her own destiny: Suzanne begins a family-planning center; Paulette's career is off and on again; she marries her Iranian lover. As the film moves from urban tragedy and conventional sexual attitudes toward a pastoral context and a broadening of boundaries, the lives of the two women become less private, more instructive. Suzanne, who has been victimized by the wrong men, finds and marries the right one. Paulette decides she cannot return to Iran with the husband she loves, and in a gesture almost too magnanimous to believe, she sends him packing with their baby boy after making sure he has impregnated her with a child of her own.

The film concludes with a hymn to pastoral togetherness shared by children and women, a husband, unwed mothers and unwed fathers—Varda's projection of a world in which the nuclear family has been superseded by less repressive relationships.

It is hard not to feel that Varda is more generous than realistic in her faith that we can so easily shed the skins of passivity and jealousy, monogamous possessiveness and maternal propriety. It is a theme that dates back to her earliest films, in which one character or another yearned for more polymorphous, inclusive loves in contexts that were sensual rather than sexual. But there is an awareness too that for one person to achieve the utopian dream, another must pay the price. There is something fatal to utopianism at the heart of human longing, and therein lies the material of drama. Once we have peered into the abyss, as we do in the early scenes of *One Sings, the Other Doesn't*, the experience is unforgettable. The shadow of that memory haunts the film and casts doubt on the sunny finale. The morbid and brooding side of human nature rises from the grave in revenge—the revenge of art on ideology, of human diversity on the brave new platitudes of sisterhood.

"...James Ivory's *Roseland* is a microcosmic reflection of human life..."

Roseland, New York's venerable ballroom, where disco never darkens the dance floor and it is the shank of the evening from 4 P.M. on, forms both subject and locale of James Ivory's new film. Ivory is the director half of the Ivory–Ismail Merchant production team, which has given us such wittily edifying portraits of modern Anglo-India (with *Shakespeare Wallah, The Guru,* and *Autobiography of a Princess).* Here, he turns his anthropologist's eye to the tribal rituals of an American exotic—the geriatric swinging single in his terminal mating dance.

Ivory doesn't gloss over the fact that most of his characters are literally on their last leg. But what could have been cheerlessly maudlin is, well, cheerfully maudlin, thanks to Ruth Prawer Jhabvala's sharp and remarkably textured screenplay and a fine cast of familiar and lesser-known Broadway and movie actors. Helen Gallagher, as the gracefully tough dance instructor, is the revelation of the film.

Roseland is divided into three sketches, each orchestrated to the leitmotiv of a different dance and revolving around a central paradox. In "The Waltz," a pleasantly senile, well-bred widow played by Teresa Wright turns out to possess less fineness of spirit than the ethnic clown, played with unusual subtlety by Lou Jacobi. In "The Hustle," a gorgeously decadent Christopher Walken has a chance to shake himself off and start over. But when it comes to walking away from the squalid dependency of his life with an aging mistress-keeper (Joan Copeland) for a younger woman (Geraldine Chaplin), he decides that the socially disreputable choice is the more honorable one. In "The Peabody," an ancient pair of contestants (Lilia Skala and David Thomas) fail once again at the trophy. The effort does them in. He chooses to die off camera and rest in peace, while her last dance, with the dreamboat emcee played by Don De Natale, is not an ending but an entrance—to that great gilded ballroom in the sky.

The activity of dancing and the fact that the characters have chosen to cash in their chips on the dance floor rather than in a lonely room lend heroism to their pathos. *Roseland* becomes a microcosmic reflection of human life, as the men collapse first and the women outlast them by several years, or dances.

Like Disneyland, or the porn houses which surround it, *Roseland* is a puritan hideaway, a world given over to fantasies. Yet its patrons are remarkably clear-eyed about their illusions. The bathrooms, as Ivory suggests in a flight of sociological poetry, occupy as central a place in their lives as the dance floor, and the men and women think nothing of invading the other's sanctuary in search of a laggard partner. This image of coed camaraderie provides one of the film's loveliest moments, and the thought that the old folks have arrived at a state of blissful sexlessness (Senior Citizens for Sex, pace) after years of segregated game playing.

I only wish that, in the same spirit of intermingling, Ivory and Jhabvala had allowed their characters to spill over into each other's stories. The sketch device seems artificial, excessively literary, especially now that Altman has opened the screen up to a more layered approach to narrative. Characters extended horizontally through a film appear to have lives of their own in a way that short-story characters—plucked from obscure destinies and then abandoned by their author—do not. In hands less compassionate than Ivory's, and among characters less irrepressible than *Roseland*'s, this rejection might have been fatal. ■