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Were Our Parents Right?

By JOY GOULD BOYUM

We may all wax nostalgic about remembrance of things past but, Proust notwithstanding, there are some things from the past that just might be better forgotten. And among them perhaps are comics—the junk entertainment of children of the pre-television age.

Back in the 1940s, when comics in the form of comic books came into their own,

On Film "Popeye" "Flash Gordon"

they occupied much the same position vis-a-vis kids as TV does today. That is, they were considered pretty corrupting stuff which our parents often prohibited and our teachers often confiscated. And not simply because they celebrated crime and violence but because, as that sensitive critic of popular culture the late Robert Warshow observed, they were "crude, unimaginative, banal, and vulgar" and as such "subversive of children's literacy, sensitivity, and general cultivation."

Of the latter statement I'm not quite sure, but of the former I have little doubt. And less doubt than ever now that all around me I keep seeing those comics resurrected—reissued in hardcover editions, canonized in Pop Art paintings, vivified on the Broadway stage, and most of all, given epic dimension in the movies. For viewed with adult eyes, the comics that many of us adored as children prove with rare exception witless and wasteful; while, as subject matter for movies at least, they also seem pretty difficult material to triumph over. But nowhere have they seemed so limited and limiting as in the current "Popeye" and "Flash Gordon."

To begin with "Popeye," which director Robert Altman and scenarist Jules Feiffer have decided to give us straight—without any new perspective and without asserting their own idiosyncratic artistic personalities: The point here seems simply to be recreation and it's a point that seems quite pointless. We are given a Popeye who, through the person of a much made-up Robin Williams, emerges the very embodiment of the minimally sketched original—with corncob pipe, squint and mispronunciations all intact. And the same fidelity marks Shelley Duvall's lanky, "101% woman," Olive Oyl, Paul Dooley's overweight, mincing Wimpy, Paul L. Smith's oversized, darkly menacing Bluto, etc. But after all this, what have we? No more than a series of grotesques among whom "biology is destiny" with a vengeance (since Popeye has muscles, he always must fight; since Olive is a damsel, she always must be in distress) and who are so undimensional as to each sound but a single note—figuratively and literally, since this is a musical in which the music is tuneless and in which no one can sing.

So much for character. What of story? Unfortunately, here too, the film has been excruciatingly true to its source. And the result is that, just as in the cartoons, the action is uninspired and unvaried, with Popeye continually putting his muscles to

use and rescuing Swee' Pea and Olive from the clutches of Bluto. Worse, as in the comic strip as well, the action tends to be distended. It's also not the least bit funny. So Popeye can punch the giant Oxheart Oxblood so hard he flies out of the ring. So Olive keeps shrieking a soprano "Help!" So Popeye says "squink" for "squint." So Wimpy keeps eating hamburgers. This simply isn't the kind of material that has one rolling in the aisles.

The only time the film manages to provide some laughs and even some dramatic interest is when it concentrates on the crooked smiles and gurgles and giggles of Swee' Pea, played by director Altman's infant grandson, Wesley Ivan Hurt. And perhaps, ironically enough, because little Wesley is the only human being in this movie who remains a human being, who hasn't been reduced, that is, to the literally lifeless dimensions of a comic strip.

As for "Flash Gordon," the best that can be said for it is that it is nowhere so doggedly faithful to its source as is "Popeye." There's been some updating so that the old-time, fair-haired, square-jawed hero is now quarterback of the New York Jets and here and there (as directed by Michael Hodges and written by Lorenzo Semple Jr.) the film indulges in some campily extravagant actions and in some puns and double-entendres (for instance, "I'm up the creek," says Flash when not only in trouble but in fact in water). Such efforts, however, don't manage to do very much to liven up this comic strip's stereotypical material. The plot is still that familiar one in which Flash and girlfriend Dale Arden are captured by Ming the Merciless only first to escape and then to be pursued and then to escape again; while the characters are still less characters than generalized embodiments of characteristics: Flash (Sam J. Jones) being brawn, Dr. Zarkov (Topol) brains, Dale Arden (Melody Anderson) beauty, and Ming (Max Von Sydow) of course mercilessness. As for the attempts at amusing wordplay and action, they are sadly lacking in sufficient wit. And in any case, by now after television's "Batman" and the movies' "Superman," the camping up of comic strips seems almost as predictable and puerile as the comics themselves.

The question these movies leave us with is just why anyone has bothered, aside that is from the obvious commercial reasons, with figures such as Flash and Popeye presumably insuring presold audiences. Can it be that the makers of these movies see these comic strips as true folk art, their heroes as authentic mythic figures worthy of multimillion dollar tribute on the silver screen? Or can it be that they see them as sociologically significant, as suggestive embodiments of the problems and tensions of their particular time and place? If so, they have given us no evidence, and most will see this stuff quite differently. For forced to re-examine our vice of the past—the comics—quite a few of us will now be a lot more sympathetic to the prohibitions and confiscations of those who were not only older but as it turned out much wiser as well.

spinning like a corkscrew down through the boardwalk—are eerily unfunny.

Sweethaven (which was constructed on the island of Malta) is a funky cuckoo-land whose people, all crabby obsessives, are as warped as its architecture and its economy. The light that bounces off the grayish buildings has an odd, enamelled quality, and the houses all seem to have been built crookbacked or to have buckled. It's a ramshackle, depressed town, with catwalks and chimneys and ladders and a red-light district—everything weather-beaten and tottering. Sweethaven is so flimsy it seems booby-trapped; you expect it to fly apart or come tumbling down. (Yet when Bluto, in a rage, smashes the Oyls' house, it isn't nearly as funny as the Big Bad Wolf blowing a house down.) Popeye, the outsider, arrives, and even before he finds lodging he's stung a couple of times by the roving tax collector, who demands money in the name of Bluto's boss, the Commodore, the town's unseen tyrant. No one makes Popeye feel welcome—the local citizens scurry away from him. The people of Sweethaven are living quirks; they might have bought their peculiarities at a novelty shop. A long, skinny man keeps hiding behind a pole; there's a man chasing his hat who keeps kicking it ahead of him, and another whose head, when pressed down, sinks into his shoulders like a turtle's. The film has virtuoso bits of business, such as four men moving a piano over a rotting rope bridge. (This gag, which does work, isn't from cartoons; it's out of Laurel & Hardy.) But there are also glimpses of sometimes indecipherable activity at the side of the frame, and there are a lot of dissociated voice-overs—a constant squawking. Some of the remarks we catch are classic griping (Olive's "Not since I was a child have we had a sharp knife in this house"); others seem to be commenting on the action—they're like wisecracks overheard from the row behind you, and with expletives that would never have been allowed in the funny pages. At first, we anticipate that we'll get to know the grouchy people of Sweethaven, especially the Oyls and Wimpy the moocher (Paul Dooley), but they have no real roles—they just keep the background busy—and the looseness of all this activity is so distracting that the foreground gags don't come off. Sometimes the foreground gags don't come off even when there isn't anything going on around them. There is

a painful scene when Olive first shows Popeye his room and the bed collapses, the picture falls from the wall, and the doorknob falls off. You don't laugh, you just stare. It may be that Altman, despite the complex, random-looking incidents he is famous for, doesn't know how to shape and pace basic slapstick. He never does anything stale, and it may be that he can't stomach the thought of clicking out a scene like this one, which has been done a million times. And possibly he thinks he'll get something more exciting by just tossing it off. But slapstick done imperfectly may come across as laborious, and that's what happens in a lot of "Popeye."

Altman's attempt to reproduce a full comic-strip lowlife environment seems to work against him in all sorts of ways. When Popeye first climbs through the streets of Sweethaven, singing a song, the editing seems peculiarly bad; his song is broken up by shifts in the camera position. Altman must be trying for the jostling, patchwork mood of comics—perhaps even for the slap impact of comic-strip frames—but the patchwork jumble doesn't develop its own rhythm, and we can't find our way into the film. The editing throws us in and pulls us out; we feel as if we're being dunked in cold water. Sweethaven is just a small fishing village, yet when the man-mountain Bluto (Paul L. Smith, who was the head guard in "Midnight Express") goes to see the Commodore we have no idea where the Commodore's boat is. The boxing ring features a big plaster statue of the champ, Oxblood Oxheart, and when Popeye defeats him the statue falls; it's an abrasive, overpowering shot. I could never get the hang of the editors' thought processes. There's a dinner scene at the Oyls' when they and their boarders are sitting around the table and all their tics seem to intermesh and they've finished the food before

Popeye can get a bite. Or is it that there was so little food that nobody got to eat more than a morsel? The double-time movements suggest something funny, but we can't quite tell what's going on.

The picture seems overcomplicated, cluttered, and the familiar Popeye phrases and situations barely emerge. Adults lose the fun of recognition of the ritual lines—they're just throwaways here. And kids aren't likely to come out chanting Wimpy's semi-immortal "I'd gladly pay you Tuesday for a hamburger today;" they may barely register it. With all the muttering and the wordplay and the tricky mispronunciations, to kids the film may seem to be in a foreign language. It's hard to know what Feiffer and Altman intended it to mean to modern children (or adults), because the story doesn't build, or even follow through. Popeye doesn't look for his pappy; he just seems to kill time. And he doesn't punch out the oppressors and become accepted by the people of Sweethaven. (That would give his "I Yam What I Yam" a kick it doesn't have.) Somehow, the oppressed-people theme gets mislaid, and we wind up with boats chasing each other and the principal characters wading around in a cove fighting an octopus and doing a lot of yelling and screaming. This Popeye doesn't even like spinach, which seems sheer perversity on the moviemakers' part—it was the huge cans of spinach that swelled those bulging forearms. (Sometimes they were even shaped like cans.) Now we don't know what the source of Popeye's superhuman strength is. The audience isn't allowed the gratification of the climactic moments in the Fleischers' "Popeye" animated cartoon series; Altman seems almost embarrassed by the conventions. He's trying to do this literal version of the "Popeye" comic strip and at the same time he doesn't want it to add up to

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"Popeye." He'd rather it didn't add up.

The picture has lovely moments in the middle section, though. Running away from her engagement party, Olive Oyl meets Popeye on the dock, staring out to sea. They both have their guard down, and they begin to talk. Then they discover the foundling, Swee'Pea, and, enchanted at having a child, they instantly become a loving couple. The movie seems to calm down. The cartoon limits are relaxed, and the audience gets a chance to laugh and show its approval, because the infant (Altman's grandson, Wesley Ivan Hurt) is a blissfully quiet charmer with a faintly lopsided smile that seems in readiness for a corncob pipe. And Olive, proudly infatuated with Popeye, twirling herself around a lamppost as she sings "He Needs Me," seems to be wafted to Heaven. Her goofy duckling-swan lyricism has its own form of weightlessness. If the remainder of the film had concentrated on these three and the shades of feeling that develop when she sings "Stay with Me" and he sings "Sail with Me," it might have been a moonshine classic, even with the deadly slapstick and the ragged editing and the spatial jumble. But when Ray Walston shows up, as Popeye's pappy, and Swee'Pea is kidnapped, the freshness goes out.

There have been oddly tentative songs (by Harry Nilsson) all along, and they've been tolerable, because at least they're not slick. And then, suddenly, there's Walston. Physically, he matches up with Robin Williams; with his muscles and squint and pipe, he's almost a mirror image—that has aged. But Walston's dry rasping is much louder than Robin Williams', and when he sings he bawls out the songs with a rambunctious Broadway pizzazz that cheapens everything. There's no innocence in his performance; it's the Broadway curse—unfelt rhythms, and everything for effect. It's bad enough when he sings "It's Not Easy Being Me;" when he goes on and on with a gravelly, tantrummy number called "Children," the picture begins to hurt your head. Olive Oyl, abducted by Bluto and trapped in a ship's funnel, keeps shrieking for Popeye—and if ever there was a scene that called for perfect timing and cutting, this is it. But her shrieks aren't modulated in terms of the shots that precede them; they're just noise—it could be *any* director's movie. And Altman commits a grandfatherly crime. In the middle of the movie, the

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audience can't get enough of Swee'Pea —his every expression is greeted with a happy "Aah." But then after he's kidnapped, when Popeye is thinking about him longingly and singing a song, there's Vaseline on the lens and we get a dotting reprise of all Swee'Pea's wonderful expressions. This time nobody "Aah"s.

"Popeye" is a *thing*, though. You don't get much pleasure from it, but you can't quite dismiss it. It rattles in your memory. Would the film have come together better if it had been simpler—without so much "environment"? Maybe—if Robin Williams had broken through, if he had felt free enough to make the role his own. But how could he feel free, starring in his first film with his face all screwed up and using only one eye? Even if the picture had been more quiet and simple, there might still be a sizable part of the public that wouldn't be too crazy about the stylized format. It's my impression that girls weren't waiting at the newsstands to buy the latest issues of comic books, the way boys were. Whether it's something about the comic-strip form itself or whether it was just the subject matter, girls didn't seem to get as hooked as boys did. And you don't hear women talking about what comic books meant to them, either—not to anything like the degree that men do. Women might be happier if Robin Williams had used both eyes and just squinted a little now and then. And this isn't a putdown of women as romantic fools: An actor's face can give us more than an impersonation of a cartoon. Two-dimensionality is tiresome.