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Two Lives on Film: Here's Looking at Me, Kid

By JOY GOULD BOYUM

Like the vain Narcissus, artists have traditionally been enamored of their own reflections; unlike him, however, they haven't been punished for it. For in art, if in few other places, egotism tends to be a permissible sin. We don't complain when painters execute self-portraits, when playwrights dramatize their own characters and conflicts, when novelists fictionalize

On Film

"All That Jazz"

"Chapter Two"

remembrances of their own pasts. So why is it that Bob Fosse's "All That Jazz," which treats of a choreographer/director who is unmistakably Mr. Fosse himself, and Neil Simon's "Chapter Two," which tells of a second marriage precisely like Mr. Simon's own, often make us squirm?

For one thing, both works come to us on film, a medium whose size and scope and explicitness tend to make the focus on the self off-putting. If the self-revelations of autobiographical novels and plays can at times make us feel like Peeping Toms, what can we say of their effect when served up larger than life and in vivid

color? When thrown on to the giant screen, the self-absorption implicit in all self-portraits tends to be blown up into something more like self-glorification.

Moreover, both films treat not of the tranquilly recollected past but of the emotionally charged present; in consequence, they tend to lack perspective and insight. The tone of both films remains unsure, wavering between irony and sentimentality and, in the case of "All That Jazz," between self-pity and self-praise as well.

Though the more brilliant and exciting film, "All That Jazz" is also, perhaps ironically, the one in which all these tendencies seem most extreme. Certainly it takes an extraordinary presumption not only to assume that an audience of strangers will be absorbed by the circumstances of an artist's recent heart attack but to structure a multi-million dollar musical around it. Yet this is precisely what Bob Fosse has done. He creates for us a screen alter-ego, one Joe Gideon, played by Roy Scheider, here transformed to look like Mr. Fosse himself.

At the moment we meet him he is living under incredible pressure. At one and the same time he is rehearsing a Broadway musical and editing a Hollywood movie. He is a compulsive womanizer, indulging in numerous affairs. And since he is also a heavy smoker, drinker and pill-popper, his

coronary is made inevitable. His open-heart surgery is startlingly graphic, with giant close-ups of the operation served up between surreal confrontations with an angel of death (here pictured as a luscious woman in white) and extravagant musical numbers (featuring dancers costumed as veins and arteries).

The one-to-one equations between this film and reality often end up downright embarrassing. We are forced not only to see Joe Gideon as Bob Fosse, his show as Mr. Fosse's Broadway hit "Chicago" and his film as Fosse's own "Lenny"; we are also made to recognize our hero's wife, his mistress and in his collaborators various well-known persons. And the film tells us things about Mr. Fosse and his friends that we feel we have no business knowing.

And if we are disturbed by the things we are told, we are also bothered by what we aren't. Aside from some Freudian mumblings (chiefly about the death wish) and some ready-made clichés (chiefly about the business of show biz), we are never really given any meaningful understanding as to what makes Gideon run. Put another way, we are never given a controlling idea that would reflect whatever value Mr. Fosse has seen in recording these bits and pieces of his life.