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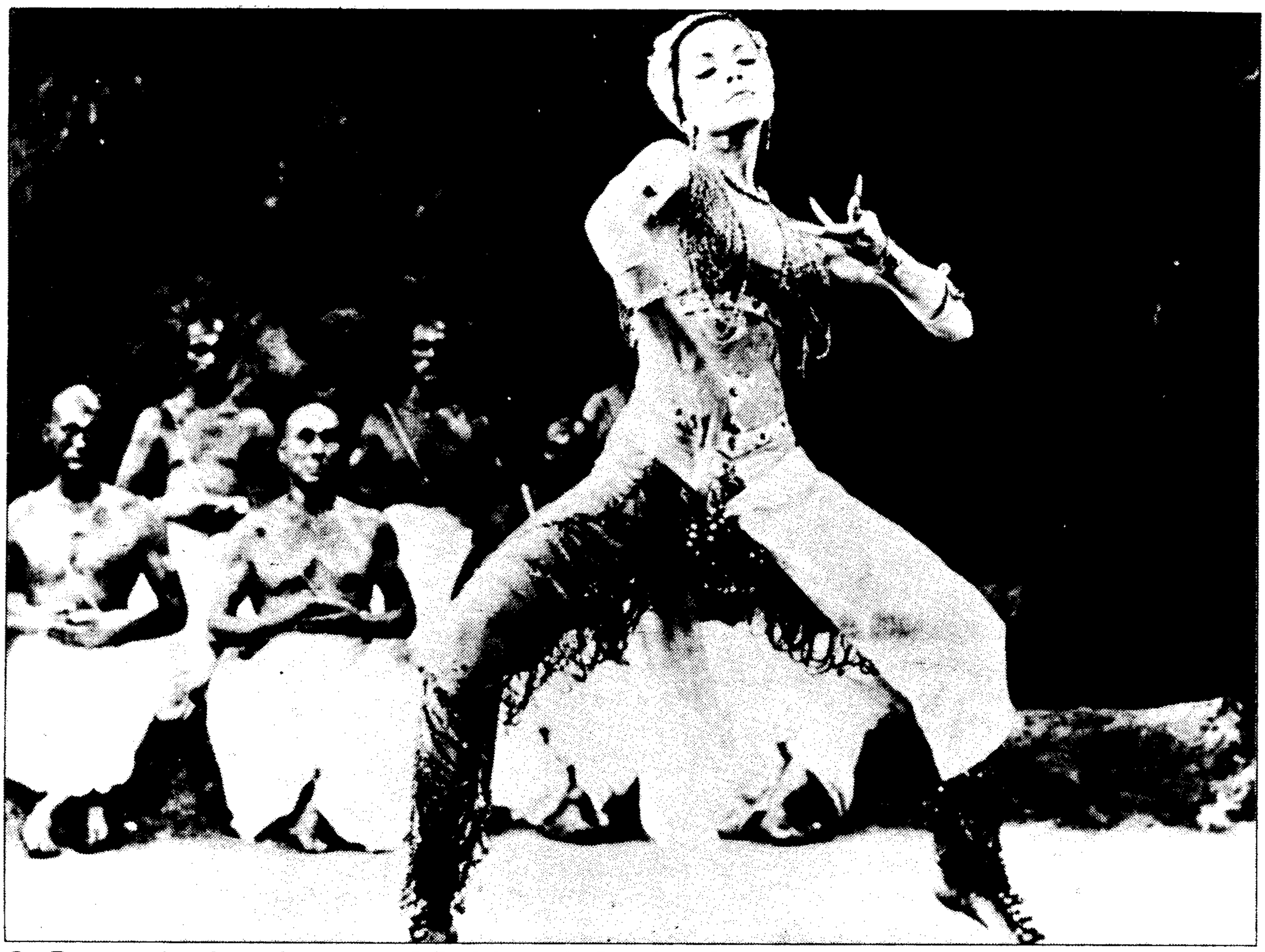

La Paget strips down for a sacred flashdance in Lang's pulp masterpiece. Ah Debra, UFA never lovelier

Hail the Trashmaster

By J. Hoberman

THE TIGER OF ESCHNAPUR and THE INDIAN TOMB. Directed by Fritz Lang. Written by Lang and Werner Jorg Luddecke from the film script *Das Indische Grabmal* by Lang and Thea von Harbou. Produced by Arthur Brauner. Distributed by the British Film Institute. At the Film Forum through September 27.

There's a sense in which certain late—often career-ending—movies by master directors form a meta-genre all their own. Films like Howard Hawks's *Red Line 7000* and Robert Bresson's *L'Argent* (or Carl Dreyer's *Gertrud* and D. W. Griffith's *The Struggle*) are not just violently auteurist, they're breathtakingly blunt: like, this is what I know. Plot lines recede behind monumentalized tics; lifelong themes return with a geriatric intensity bordering heroically on the absurd.

Fritz Lang's *The Tiger of Eschnapur* and *The Indian Tomb*—a two-part feature opening today at the Film Forum some 24 years after its European release—belong to this much-maligned category. The films only make sense as capping the Lang oeuvre but it's not that they're difficult to follow. In an interview with Peter Bogdanovich, Lang referred to *Eschnapur/Tomb* as a "fever dream"—as good a description as any for his surreal (yet spatially coherent) mix of exotic Indian locations, pasteboard palaces, and the labyrinthian catacombs of some Munich soundstage.

A great pulp artist, Lang first conceived of images and then wrote scripts to accommodate them and the Eschnapur films abound with unforgettable grace notes: a fakir's trick gone murderously awry, a miraculous spiderweb that protects two lovers in their hillside cave, the desert-crazed hero firing his pistol at the sun (a wonderful bit of lunacy quoted by Werner Herzog at the end of *Signs of Life*). "India awakens so *many* enthusiasms," the tormented maharajah Chandra dryly remarks to the hapless European he's about to feed to the palace tigers.

Chandra would doubtless be renamed Sandra in a Theater of the Ridiculous version of the film but Lang's mise-en-scène is less campy than it is cursorily hyperbolic. Emeralds are the size of golfballs in Eschnapur and a stone Durga looks like a 20-foot-tall *Playboy* centerfold. Of course, *The Tiger of Eschnapur* and *The Indian Tomb* are juvenile trash. In fact, they're juvenile trash by the man who, working for the UFA studio in Weimar, Germany, virtually invented the form. Where would *Flash Gordon* be were it not for Lang's *Siegfried* or *Metropolis*? (Actually, Lang's true successors are less Lucas and Spielberg—or even Jacques Rivette—than comic book geniuses like the indefatigable Jack Kirby.)

As far as camp goes, *Cobra Woman*—the delirious Maria Montez vehicle directed by Lang's fellow Viennese emigré Robert Siodmak—offers a useful cross-reference. *Cobra Woman* is campy in part for Montez, and in part for its blandly situational World War II allegory (Montez's celebrated cobra dance parodies Hitler's performance in *Triumph of the Will*; the Aztec-Samoan-Hindu culture of Cobra Island is ultimately made safe for U.S.-style democracy). *Eschnapur*, by contrast, is a more detached (even timeless) and seemingly tranquil meditation on the stock situations and epic camera setups its author pioneered 40 years earlier.

FILM

The original *Tiger of Eschnapur*—a 20-million-mark, animal-crammed superproduction—was written by Lang and his bride-to-be Thea von Harbou and directed by Joe May in 1920. (So enduring was the film's German popularity that it was remade under the Nazis by Richard Eichberg.) When, in 1958, Lang was invited by German producer Arthur Brauner to return from Hollywood and direct a third version he accepted with a mixture of pleasure and resignation. It was "a circle that was beginning to close," he told Bogdanovich, "a kind of fate." Marcel Proust couldn't have said it better.

Dramatically as well as visually, *Eschnapur* is far closer to Lang's silent period than it is to anything he directed in Hollywood. But the return to adolescent fantasy is filtered through 69 years of experience. The theme, appropriate to Lang's career, is the fragility of civilization; the trajectory is nothing less than a descent into the nightmare of some imagined "India"—exemplified by the terrifying leper colony that festers in the caverns beneath the dungeons of Chandra's palace.

Lang undermines the imperialist megalomania inherent in exotic pulp by portraying his European protagonists as blithely innocent monsters. The heroic Harald Berger (Paul Hubschmid) comes to Eschnapur to construct a hospital. Instead, he desecrates several temples and elopes with Chandra's fiancée (Debra Paget). Consequently, Berger's ultra-Teutonic sister and brother-in-law, Dr. and Irene Rhodes, arrive to work on the project. Glomming the blueprints, Frau Rhodes asks Herr Doktor: "Have you any idea what 'leper pit' means?" Before the film ends, she's found out for herself and used their dynamite to blast Chandra's palace—the entire rajdom—to smithereens.

Although engagingly tacky, *Eschnapur/Tomb* was likely Lang's most lavish production since his epochal *Metropolis* and it's striking how closely their libidinal economies resemble each other. As in *Metropolis*, *Eschnapur*'s erotic highpoint is a lengthy hoochie-koochie dance. Fresh from triumphant performances in *Love Me Tender* and *The Ten Commandments*, sultry Paget strips down to Vegas pasties for a lascivious shimmy with a sacred cobra. (The snake is a dummy but, ah Debra, UFA never lovelier.) And both epics end with an absolutist regime overthrown by the return of the repressed—the subterranean world breaking loose with giant floods and rioting subhumans. Unlike *Metropolis*, however, *Eschnapur/Tomb* offers no proto-fascist social prescription, just the exotic Buddhist total renunciation of the world.