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A Dreamer in a Dream-Factory

By JOY GOULD BOYUM

F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Last Tycoon" is a novel about Hollywood which takes as its central and title character a brilliant young producer named Monroe Stahr. At one point in the book, the narrator tells us that in Stahr's private projection room, "Dreams hung in fragments at the far end of the room. . . ."

In the current movie version of Fitzgerald's novel, as adapted for the screen by Harold Pinter, the phrase has been discarded but the perception has been retained. In fact, it has become the film's controlling vision, making "The Last Tycoon" very much of a piece with Pinter's own compelling and enigmatic works. But Pinter has not sacrificed Fitzgerald in the process. "The Last Tycoon" emerges both

On Film "The Last Tycoon"

a faithful adaptation and an extraordinary film in its own right—not simply a nostalgic movie about Hollywood and movie-making, but a rich and resonant statement about dreams and dreaming.

Both the mechanics of making a Hollywood movie and the Hollywood world itself figure largely in the film. Monroe Stahr, after all, as "the boy wonder" of an important movie studio during the 1930s, recalls the great producer Irving Thalberg. Like Stahr, Thalberg came from a humble New York Jewish background, was married to a glamorous actress, and suffered from a heart condition. And Robert De Niro's frail and delicate aura underscores the resemblance just as his incredibly controlled performance gives Stahr an almost startling reality.

And by watching the tycoon at work—removing director Dana Andrews from a film when he is unable to tap the potential of actress Jeanne Moreau, comforting actor Tony Curtis when he is plagued by personal problems, and inspiring screenwriter Donald Pleasence when he is stalemated by professional ones—we become absorbed by the character and genius of Stahr as filmmaker. Watching him, we become aware that a great producer must be not only an efficient and intelligent executive, always on the move and always in command, but a gifted artist, able to sense instinctively what is aesthetically viable.

The Pinter-Fitzgerald "Tycoon" isn't just concerned with giving us an insightful glimpse of Hollywood as a dream-factory, however. It also gives us Monroe Stahr as a portrait of a dreamer. Stahr is not only akin to Irving Thalberg, he's an incarnation of Fitzgerald's own Jay Gatsby. Both Stahr and Gatsby are lonely men obsessed with the past. Both were overwhelmed by a dream embodied in the image of an elusive "golden girl." And like Gatsby, too, Stahr is a dreamer ultimately destroyed by his dream.

Elia Kazan's direction, in tune with Pinter's script, underscores the motif by infusing the film with an increasingly dream-like texture. When Stahr remembers his dead actress wife, for example, her image

appears to his mind's eye in the form of a film-clip. When he first sees Kathleen (Ingrid Boulting), the beautiful Irish girl who closely resembles his wife, she is made to seem a movie image come alive. Later, meeting Kathleen at a party, Stahr doesn't hear the music the orchestra is playing but only the music of his imagination.

And when, at the end, Stahr loses Kathleen in reality, he regains her in dream, seeing her as part of an imaginary movie he is creating. But the perfectly reserved executive loses control of himself and the world around him. He drinks too much and loses a ridiculous fight with Communist labor organizer Jack Nicholson. He also becomes a ready victim for his arch-rivals at the studio: production chief Robert Mitchum and his confederate, studio lawyer Ray Milland.

But unlike Gatsby, who is killed at the end of his story, Stahr's destruction remains incomplete and inconclusive. Fitzgerald died suddenly of a heart attack before finishing "The Last Tycoon." He did, however, provide notes suggesting what his ending would be. Pinter has chosen to ignore these notes, selecting instead to leave Stahr's fate ambiguous and thus make the inconclusiveness of experience another theme of this inconclusive work. But Pinter has not betrayed Fitzgerald. The world of "The Last Tycoon" is, as Fitzgerald biographer Arthur Mizener puts it, a "queer, half-finished, floating world." Stahr and Kathleen, in the book as in the film, consummate their love at the half-finished house Stahr is building at Malibu; in both book and film (and in fragments of film within the film), we listen to stories that are left partial and dangling.

"Suppose you're in your office and a woman comes in," Stahr says one day to a screenwriter, attempting to explain what kind of action makes for an effective movie script. Stahr then goes on to describe the woman taking off her black gloves, burning them in the office stove, and after emptying the contents of her purse on the desk, answering the sudden ring of the telephone with the statement: "I've never owned a pair of black gloves in my life." "Then what happens?" the writer asks. "I don't know," Stahr answers, "I only make movies."

Like the writer, most of us will also want to know what happens and the inconclusiveness of the film will indeed be frustrating to many, just as many may also be made uncomfortable by the empty spaces Pinter has left around his dialogue and those Kazan has left within his scenes. Yet the film could only have been tightened and thus heightened dramatically at the expense of its own purposes. The point is that there's a feeling of control and authority about "The Last Tycoon" that persuades you that the film knows precisely what it's doing. Such control makes you respect and even trust the filmmakers' decisions. For while all of them may not in the end have been the right ones, they have nevertheless made for a film of rare intelligence and sensitivity, brilliantly cast and for the most part superbly performed.