

Provocative Films

The Golden Eighties, You the Better
Walker Art Center

La Balance
U Film Society

BY MICHAEL PHILLIPS

PERHAPS because there's a built-in expectation for the movies to "do it to us," even on a noncommercial scale, people don't give experimental film the leeway they give avant-garde dance or art. Cinema is psychologically linked to escapism, and when a movie forces its viewers to *think* instead, that movie automatically narrows its audience. But film has as much right as any medium to exasperate, outrage, elude and provoke an audience. Through April 24 the Walker Art Center (in conjunction with Film in the Cities) continues its series of women's experimental films, works that can be exasperating, outrageous, elusive and provocative — and often all at once.

Of the filmmakers represented, the Belgian Chantal Ackerman comes riding in on the most notoriety, largely due to *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai Du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975). Shown commercially for the first time last year, the three-hour, 20-minute film has been



Seamy underworld: In 'La Balance', Baye's a prostitute, Leotard's an informer.

jeered off the screen at more than one film festival — and lavishly praised by more than one respected critic.

In retrospect (it played last weekend), this film stands as a uniquely revealing

chronicle of one woman's loss of control. More precisely, Ackerman's film, starring Delphine Seyrig (one of the lost ones in *Last Year at Marienbad*) details the grimly comic parade of domestic ritual

that makes up the life of one Brussels woman. Cleaning, cooking, shopping, bed-making, shoe-polishing: We are shown three narcotizing days in Jeanne Dielman's routine, which includes turning tricks to support herself and her glum son.

Commercial film depicts housework as *Mr. Mom*-type chores that come oh-so-naturally to the fair sex. Here, thanks to Ackerman and cinematographer Babette Mangolte's utterly still, ultra-compressed compositions (all parallel lines and right angles), we almost literally watch the walls close in on housewife Dielman. Watching Dielman's disintegrating three days is alternately maddening and hypnotic; the film, like its protagonist, is so rigidly constructed, so meticulous, that when things start slipping it's evidenced only by the smallest clues. A dropped shoe brush and a misplaced button are psychological thunderclaps in this universe, and that is proof enough of the strength of Ackerman's concept.

Repetition and routine take on special significance in Ackerman's work. In *The Golden Eighties* (shown this Friday) those techniques pare away the seductive insipidness of the musical comedy genre. The 1983 movie begins with a series of videotaped auditions for a mini-musical

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of sorts, as we hear a stream of men and women act out the banal "romance" dialogue. Part two brings these disconnected scenes to life in a cheesily earnest, 35mm song-and-dance extravaganza. Partly set in a squeaky clean hair salon, the show within the show is half high school talent show, half deadpan Ionesco absurdism.

You don't know where Ackerman is going in the documentary-like audition portions, and as in *Jeanne Dielman*, she can be accused of exhausting her ideas before she's ready to let go of them. But the details are amazingly telling. The various traditional male-female power plays stylized in musical form become increasingly, wittily clear as *The Golden Eighties* simultaneously embraces and

rejects these cliches. It's a tantalizing genre, and Ackerman's film is a wry jab at its most destructive underlying messages.

Ackerman isn't providing any solutions to the retrograde sexual roles depicted here. That isn't the point. As Chekhov noted, there's a big difference between the answer to a problem and the *correct posing* of a problem, and the latter is the artist's only real obligation. Love them or hate them, these films question both life and art most shrewdly.

This Tuesday the series continues with a program of four shorts including *You the Better* (1983). Ericka Beckman's punchy, accomplished little riff on the nature of competition matches its subject with a kinetic, rhythmically choreographed treatment. Set to the dissonant rap of Beckman and Brook Halpin's fine score,

You the Better eventually turns into a surreal game of one-sided basketball, wherein the players — all spouting mundane wisdom like, "They control the tempo!" and "Take a shot at the wheel!" — play against a larger-than-life roulette table. It's an interesting, visually alert movie, one that makes its points without succumbing to the overliteral.

On the opposite end of the commercial scale is the hard, fast, pulpy *La Balance* (1982), written and directed by U.S. expatriate Bob Swaim and shot in French amid the seamy Parisian underworld. The plot is a familiar cat-and-mouse game of ruthless cops, underworld "scumbags" and the informers caught between them.

There's a tendency to overpraise this kind of flashy noir-ish stuff, simply

because it's a grab bag of familiar archetypes plunked down in a more exotic setting than usual. The various double-crossings and casual beatings get a little tiresome toward the end, and we never have much stake in the love interest between the informer (Philippe Leotard, the most interesting face in the movie) and the prostitute (Nathalie Baye, reliable as ever in a flat role).

But Swaim can bang one of these together, no question. For what it is, *La Balance* is skillfully done, right down to the shamelessly pumped-up theme song that out-Peter Gunns *Peter Gunn*. Teetering on the edge of hard-ass camp but never quite blowing it, Swaim borrows from American television and movie sources while delivering his own set of goods. Whether the goods are worth delivering is a matter of taste. ■