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New York Summer Hit List

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ACTUALITÉS/EXPOSITIONS

NEW YORK

Summer Hit List

This summer I enjoyed the dubious pleasure of staying in town. While the rest of New York headed for vacationlands north, south, east and west, while the Soho art scene moved *en masse* to East Hampton, I stayed in town. By late July, all the galleries were closed, the museums were trotting out their lightweight exhibitions for the expected tourist audience, and TV was deep into its summer rerun schedule. I bunkered in, turned on the air conditioner, and walked my dogs. But all was not lost. For inquiring minds that want to know, here are the highlights of my summer vacation.

Thelma and Louise

(1991, directed by Ridley Scott, MGM/Pathé)

The national debate that quickly followed the release of *Thelma and Louise* was not solely due to its girls-with-guns iconography. After all, the first US servicewomen to brandish M-16s had just served in the Gulf War and returned to a tumultuous ticker tape parade in downtown Manhattan, while other recent movies (*La femme Nikita*, *The Silence of the Lambs*) also featured pistol-packing ladies. But these women, whether real life or fictional, acted under the orders of male superiors in male-dominated hierarchies (the army, the FBI, a spy network).

The underlying threat of *T and L* is that of female empowerment and self actualization, the spectre of women rising up and choosing their freedom, saying, in effect, "I'm sick and tired and I'm not gonna take it anymore". Thelma, a dissatisfied housewife (Geena Davis) and Louise, a hashhouse waitress (Susan Sarandon), first take up the gun to stop a would-be rapist in a honkytonk parking lot, accidentally killing him in self defense. Fleeing from the law, they gradually give up the usual female accoutrements (makeup, jewelry, lacy bodices, full skirts) for a lean, stripped-down, outlaw look (jeans, t-shirts, battered hats) as they become feminist avenging angels: robbing a convenience store, chastising an overbearing state trooper, blowing up the rig of a sexist trucker ("Bitches from hell", he screams).

A female/buddy/road film, *T and L* is nothing if not self-consciously mythic. But it works. Director Scott is no stranger to strongly self-determined women characters (Sigourney Weaver in *Alien*), and as a former art director he manages to get the maximum visual punch out of

each scene. *T and L* is played out against the buttes, bluffs, canyons and wide open spaces of the American southwest (like a John Ford western) and along the mythic American roadside of biker bars, truck stops, gas stations, railroad crossings and motels. The girls even drive a mythic car, Louise's green T-bird convertible.

There are myriad subplots: Thelma's sexual awakening with a grinning, hip twitching young outlaw (Brad Pitt); the sympathetic cop (Harvey Keitel); Thelma's solipsistic husband; the rasta biker who blows smoke down an airhole at a trapped state trooper. But the real reason to see *T and L* is for the lure of the open highway. Hit the road, Jacqueline.

Wigstock, Union Square, September 2, 1991

Every Labour Day for the past six years, the fag/drag spectacle of Wigstock has taken place in the bandshell of Tompkins Square Park. A campy spoof on the hippie Woodstock, an eight hour festival of peace, love and East Village cross dressing, it featured local rock acts and a generous sampling of transvestite talent from the nearby Pyramid Club, dancing and lipsynching to the latest disco thump.

Times have changed. The park has been indefinitely closed for renovation (and to evict its itinerant population of homeless) and the bandshell itself has been torn down. This year's Wigstock was relocated to Union Square, less than a mile away geographically but light years away spiritually.

Gone were the insularity and bumbling familiarity of Tompkins Square, the feeling of enclosed weirdness, faulty amplification and neighbourhood idiosyncrasy. This year, Wigstock made a bold grab for the mainstream, complete with corporate sponsorship, professional looking banners, and a short introductory speech by a local politico.

The festival maintained its full share of preening and posturing, both on stage and in the audience; the program was still an hour and a half late in starting; and the sound system did in fact break down (but only once). But the entire variety show seemed more than a bit forced, a mechanical trotting out of gay schtick for the masses, for a huge but foreign audience, some of whom looked like they had never been to New York before, let alone to the East Village. This year, Wigstock sold out.



Frank (Viggo Mortensen) and Joe (David Morse) in *The Indian Runner*, 1991.
Photo: Helmut Newton

Even Lady Bunny's typically ebullient/bitchy role as mistress of ceremonies could not hide the underlying air of grim professionalism that characterized most performers,

as they each tried their best to reach the greatest number of talent agents in their allotted time segment. Exceptions to the grimness: Dean Johnson, a bald, six foot tall drag queen with hoop earrings; the legendary Lypsinka; and Joey Arias, resplendent in a glittering, metallic outfit that made him look otherworldly.

It makes one wonder: even if Tompkins Square does reopen by next September, will the drag queens want to go back to life on the farm now that they've seen *Paree*? Or will Wigstock 8 make it to Las Vegas?

Low Life, Lures and Snares of Old New York, by Luc Sante, published by Farrar Straus Giroux, 1991

This intoxicatingly off-centre history of the lower classes in 19th and early 20th century New York City is a compelling melange of greed, corruption, abuse, violence and deceit – the same qualities that make New York a uniquely thriving metropolis today.

Luc Sante is an astute, ironic observer of human frailty, who takes obvious pleasure in documenting the crumbling, overcrowded tenements, the offal-filled streets, the shadowy and dangerous slums, the saloons with their scams and mickey-finned drinks, the raging and murderous waterfront, the gambling and whoring, the scams and cons, the opium dens, cocaine parlors and gangland wars, the totally corrupt political machine of Tammany Hall, the police ready for bribe or hire.

Low Life is not just for students of New York, not just for those fascinated by crime or depravity, not just for habitual sojourners in *la boue*, although all of these will find the book's anecdotal richness to be a potent elixir, as in the following passage (page 361):

The Bowery is the capital of night. On its sidewalks, people are crashing through saloon doors, shouldering through crowds looking for a fight, looking for lost fathers or husbands, hooking out-of-towners to try to sell them worthless junk at wild prices, raising money for a bed, picking cigar butts out of the gutter, flashing rolls of bills to impress newly met acquaintances, preaching the gospel to nobody at all, selling stolen

watches from under their coats, selling newspapers, selling favours, selling themselves.

Sante has managed to focus on the seeds of vitality rooted in squalor, on pleasure,

temptation, pain and desperation, creating an unforgettable portrait of the funky downtown aesthetic, of the dark side of the street, which jumps off the page to inform our contemporary society.

The Indian Runner (1991, directed by Sean Penn, MGM)

Every so often, but not often enough, you come across a film so well realized, and of such total conviction, that it makes you aware of a born filmmaker, a true believer utterly compelled to tell his story. Such films include *The 400 Blows* by François Truffaut, *Days of Heaven* by Terence Malick, *Breathless* by Godard. They are frequently first features by the directors in question, and give the feeling of having gestated for years, of going through a long incubation waiting to be born.

Even so, it's hard to believe that *The Indian Runner* is Sean Penn's directorial debut. This sparse, moody evocation of brotherly loyalty, conflict and familial disintegration is real, assured and complete. The screenplay, also by Penn, and inspired by the Bruce Springsteen song "Highway Patrolman", is obviously a very personal statement. Penn has his finger right on the pulse of small town anomie, frustration and emptiness, the anger of shattered dreams, the pain of failure, the presentiment of inescapable doom, the mournful certainty of having to get up each day and go to work.

There's a lot to cherish here. The flash fade of a winter Nebraska highway. The resonant late 60s soundtrack (Traffic, Jefferson Airplane, Quicksilver Messenger Service, the Band, Creedence Clearwater) that not only delivers a sense of time and place, but also seems perfectly matched to the mood of the characters, like a well-tuned Greek chorus. The intensified sense of place itself: flat, featureless roadsides; cornfields; prison; fleabag hotel; tavern; home.

But most of all, there's the cast. Joe Roberts, solid family man and state trooper, played with fine, quiet assurance and depth by David Morse. His wild, Vietnam vet brother Frank, incarnated with a palpable restlessness, an uncanny undercurrent of rage striking out into random



Woody and Otis. Photo: Tom Warven.

acts of violence, by the remarkable Viggo Mortensen. Charles Bronson in a supporting role as their father, with the most poignant late night suicide phone call that I've ever seen in the movies. Patricia Arquette, who plays Frank's wife with a startling, trilling innocence. Dennis Hopper as the low-life bartender who encourages Frank in his nihilism.

Integrity and authenticity are hard to come by these days, but its good to know they can still be recognized when you stumble over them. *Indian Runner* is a film you'll want to see more than once.

Woody and Otis, my Basset Hounds

They're not going to be the art dogs of the century. That title is probably reserved for Bill Wegman's weimrauners, Man Ray and Faye Wray. But if they attend enough art openings, I can hopefully train them to piss on the gallery floor if the art is mediocre and howl when the work amazes or delights. Which would make them both more direct and more understandable in their aesthetic decisions than many New York art critics.

Black Lizard (1968, directed by Kinji Fukasaku, Shochiko Studios, released by Cinevista)

Combine the freewheeling camp of 60s psychedelia with the traditional Japanese art of *onnagata* (male Kabuki actors playing female roles) and you still will not be ready for the exquisitely stylized excesses of *Black Lizard*, an overheated thriller destined to become a cult classic in America 23 years after its initial Japanese release.

Starring Japan's foremost female impersonator of the time, Akihiro Maruyama, in the title role of a daring and erotic criminal genius, *Black Lizard* opens in a flashy nightclub decorated in Aubrey Beardsley hermaphrodilia. A swarm of go-go dancers frug the night away in their Pucci catsuits. Enter Maruyama, descending the stairs, dressed in a glittering black ensemble, including sequined choker, intoning some portentous lines about sleepless nights and the shadows of crime, and you're hooked for the next 86 minutes.

An exercise in unforgivably overblown dementia, the film unrepentingly trots out the most hackneyed B movie melodramatic ploys: trap doors, hollow furniture,

obvious disguises, confused identities and doppelgangers. Maruyama is a surrealistic vision all to him/herself, vamping to

the rafters, pouting, batting her eyes, posturing with her cigarette holder, and appearing in a succession of costumes, each more impossibly baroque than the last.

A jewel heist caper in which lines like "You have trampled cruelly on a woman's heart" are delivered in a deadpan monotone, the film is part Pink Panther, part James Bond, part comic strip, and totally insane. For aficionados of the Japanese scene, *Black Lizard* is scripted from a stage adaptation by Yukio Mishima, who also puts in a cameo appearance as part of the Lizard's erotic menagerie of petrified human dolls. It's really a film for the whole family. If the formalist in you is not charmed by a completely intrusive Bach organ fugue that sounds at appropriately climactic moments, then you can always munch on the gay necrophilia.

Fela Anikulapo Kuti and Egypt 90, Subs, August 20, 1991

Since he doesn't play New York often, it was a pleasure to see the bantam rooster of African funk strut his stuff in front of a large band – at least 25 – of guitars, bass, drums, percussion, horns, dancers and singers. Unfortunately, he introduced one of his many young sons, by one of his many wives, who atonally sounded off on the classic "Sorrow, Tears and Blood". Get the kid a day job.

One of these gigs can unwind for three hours or more, with extended, wild, jagged instrumental jams punctuated by passages of recitative, as the incomparable Fela sings, chants, dances and pontificates over it all. Fela is not just interested in entertaining. He approaches the gig as a podium, and instructs his mixed, standing-room-only audience of whites, Africans and American blacks on various matters that they might or might not want to hear about. The prime material covered in this night's informal class: African as a "sound language"; Fela as a citizen of all Africa and not just one country; corrupt Nigerian penal practices, which literally feed off the poor; and various West African slang words for "clitoris". So you could say it was a stimulating summer. At least in parts.

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