

a review

and more

Beware!—*Staircase* is about as abysmal a movie as you'll ever see. Nothing speaks well for this film. The too visible framework behind it is another play, Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. There are two characters who have built up a psychic equilibrium based on verbal violence. Like the famous symbiotic marriage of George and Martha, Richard Burton and Rex Harrison have learned to thrive on their cutting and slashing; and both of them respect the limits and boundaries beyond which mutual agreement does not allow them to go. During the film, of course, they do overstep these boundaries, and the balance is upset. Harrison brings in a young hustler for revenge just as Martha seduces the young college teacher to get back at her husband. The "telegram" announcing the death of their imaginary son is present in *Staircase* in the form of a summons ordering Harrison to appear in court to stand trial for appearing in drag at a bar and propositioning a young man.

Unfortunately this framework has become a fossilized cliché over the years, and, without Albee's wit, its reenactment by two homosexuals just makes it seem that much more devoid of life. The direction stodgily recreates what must have been a dreadful play. The acting juxtaposes Burton and Harrison (both made to look as unattractive as possible) in a contest for the lousiest homosexual impersonation. The photography is best represented by a scene in which one character tosses an ice cream away and we are given a giant color close-up as it hits the ground. The tasteless screenplay is so crudely Freudian and so self-consciously literary that neither Burton nor Harrison can make a statement without employing at least two or three atrocious quadruple metaphors. Even the attempts at campy humor are not funny unless you go in for these two British leading men parodying the traditional stereotype of the homosexual—prissing around, eyes bugging out, pursing their lips and referring to each other as "she."

As for its insights into the lives of homosexuals—*Staircase* reads like a handbook to the homosexual stereotype. On a very crude level it does try to explode some myths. For example, the common picture of the dreadful aging queen is mercilessly destroyed by a nasty depiction of Burton's mother as an ancient arthritic monster who must be spoon fed, who wets the bed, whines and cries in self-pity, and who gets her shriveled face regularly splattered with rouge, lipstick, and eyeshadow—certainly not the most inspiring image of the female growing old. The myth of homosexual impotence is taken care of by making Harrison the father of a daughter by an earlier "heterosexual" marriage (this myth functions in the film by providing Burton with his verbal "boundary"—he can accuse Harrison of not having been the real father of his wife's child). Burton's "homosexual" vanity—displayed in an obsession with his baldness—is balanced by his decrepit old mother's joy at seeing her hideously painted face in a mirror. The customary depiction of homosexuals as erotically hyperactive is thrown out altogether—Burton and Harrison, the film implies, have had no physical relationship for some time. The film actually reverses some of the myths heterosexuals have about the sex lives of homosexuals: while this domesticated, quarreling mar-

ried couple have their difficulties living together in the midst of trials and misfortunes, heterosexuals are out there coupling at will, making it in the park, showing open affection in the streets, getting all they can use and more, and vaunting their freedom shamelessly.

But even this destruction of stereotypes is self-defeating. The attack itself is grounded in the same theoretical perspective from which the stereotypes flow. *Staircase* accepts the institutions and prescribed sex roles of contemporary western society. It wants the viewer to look at a homosexual marriage of many years and gain some insight into the "plight" of poor homosexuals struggling to approximate a heterosexual marriage and torn apart by society's refusal to let them have their cake and eat it, too. What *Staircase* does not get into is crucial: the cake is rotten, whether it is a homosexual or a heterosexual doing the eating. A homosexual "marriage" may not work, but it won't be because the participants are males involved in an erotic relationship with each other; rather it will fail because the chosen form of their relationship is not only erotic but social and economic, and both participants are men. As Donald Webster Cory put it in *The Homosexual in America*, "... there is nothing in the nature of homosexuality that prevents a stable relationship. It is not heterosexuality that contributes stability but the presence of a female." Marriage is based on an oppression that crumbles when both partners are male. Since the homosexual world is very often no more than an attempted copy of the institutions of our pseudomasculine, anti-sexual society (with the resulting non-forms like the homosexual "marriage," the "female"



partner, the homosexual "wife"), the homosexual marriage is probably the best place to examine the heterosexual one: it more graphically demonstrates the social and psychic damage done when one sex attempts to enslave the other and to institutionalize its social, economic and sexual subservience.

Burton is the "wife" in *Staircase*. He does all the cooking, the cleaning, the staying at home; Harrison is the dashing gallant who has kept his looks (and his hair). Downstairs from their apartment, they run a barber shop, and this joint venture conflicts with their traditional dominant/subservient relationship upstairs. Burton has become a "shrew" who scolds Harrison, takes care of him, and who usually yields when it comes to that. Are we supposed to feel some kind of benevolent pity for Burton as he slaves over a hot stove, makes the beds, cleans the bathroom tub while Harrison brings a disgusting half-idiot hustler into their bedroom out of spite? Is Burton's subjection ameliorated by the fact that he can exercise some form of passive power over his oppressor? The role of "wife" seems more easily disgusting when enacted by a male because men have not been programmed into such a role and we have not been programmed into accepting men in this role. The full weight of society's institutions and mores does not support the oppressed state of a man in an erotic situation and, in fact, works against his subjections to another's will. Homosexual versions of western sexual institutions have nothing to do with the dynamics of the society within which they must survive. The same is true of a marriage between a man and a woman: such socio-economic structures as mar-

riage, the family, parenthood, etc., do not flow out of the erotic relationship between the partners but from the capitalist economy which seeks to perpetuate itself and its inherent oppressions.

*Staircase* begins with a campy Broadwayish song—"Climb the staircase of life with me" or some such shit as that—which is, I assume, sung by two men in drag and which, I also assume, is supposed to represent the emptiness of homosexual "culture" and set the tone for the "sad gay story" that follows. Anytime you see a reference to "gay" that is used ironically to mean "sad," watch for a view of homosexuals that functions to support a comparatively healthy one of heterosexuality—that is, the sacred economic institutions of capitalist western culture. The only thing really sad about the couple in *Staircase* is their failure to go beyond the prefabricated institutional houses provided for them by the power structure that oppresses them. Thus, they are "sad"—like millions of male-female couples all over the western world. Other homosexuals don't fall into this trap, hang loose sexually, and are envied by heterosexuals, partially for their relative sexual freedom but primarily for their freedom from the oppressive institutions. What is encouraging today is that young men and women are beginning to reject the prescribed roles and are living like many homosexuals have been forced to live. "Promiscuity" is a word basically used to denote sexual relationships which do not perpetuate the social status quo and its supportive institutions. But "promiscuity" now functions creatively as a stage through which we are discovering new forms of human, familial relationships which cannot function under capitalism and demand new economic structures and supportive institutions that have their origin and function within the realm of eroticism, not exploitative economics. Now that women are rejecting the role Burton plays in *Staircase*, an eroticism of choice and freedom is possible.

The ultimate cop-out of *Staircase* is the same as in most films dealing with the subject of male homosexuality (lesbianism is treated differently altogether—as much flesh as possible is allowed because it appeals to men): its fear of portraying physical relationships between homosexuals with the same candor and overt eroticism possible in the depiction of heterosexual relationships on the screen. It is ironic that the brief bedroom scene in which Harrison, fully clothed, rejects the unbelievably mild overture (he touches the other on the shoulder) of Burton, also fully clothed, is actually given more shock value than the graphic nude hetero fucking scene in the rain, or the horrendous, impeccably heterosexual behavior of Harrison's deranged wild-eyed mother when she drives him out of her nursing home, quoting the bible and screaming "Sodomite!" It is becoming more and more clear that a serious film about homosexuality that challenges us out of our preconceptions cannot be made until it can cast a Mick Jagger and a Terence Stamp as happy lovers and show their nude love-making scenes. Until then I guess we will be deluged with subsequent versions of *The Sergeant*, *The Gay Deceivers*, and *Staircase*.

—miller francis, jr.