

CINEMA

My First Wife

Directed by Paul Cox; screenplay by Paul Cox and Bob Ellis; with John Hargreaves and Wendy Hughes.

Those of you familiar with the work of Australian director Paul Cox might be expecting another comedy with *My First Wife*. The title is peculiar enough and Cox certainly has a history of offbeat forays into humor but this is no

REVIEW

comedy, despite its wryly witty moments of human observation. Rather, Cox has applied his unique sensibilities and crazy accurate understanding of human behavior to a riveting drama of marriage crisis.

John Hargreaves and Wendy Hughes are John and Helen, spouses in a ten-year marriage that has borne a beautiful seven-year-old daughter, Lucy (Lucy Angwin). Our first glimpses of the couple are, fittingly, as they are separated. John hosts a classical music program on a local radio station. Helen uses that time to have an affair, timing John's arrival with the program. They feel cold and distant at first but Cox develops them both into full characters. John lives for his music; when not on the air he is always surrounded by arias and concertos, even in his dreams, and he composes as well. Later it becomes clear he is even more emotionally impassioned than he is musically; his feelings burst out explosively before he can check or subdue them. Helen is the oppo-



John Hargreaves, as John, visits his dying father in *My First Wife*.

site. Subtle and soft-spoken, she is a strong-willed woman who has fallen out of love with the fanatical John and finds comfort in the arms of John's friend Tom (David Cameron).

The confrontation finally comes in a powerful bedroom scene. John, unhappy because Helen turns from his touch, asks her if she has ever been unfaithful, and she answers yes, and furthermore she wants to leave him. John is awestruck; he still loves Helen deeply though she feels nothing for him. He is ready to forgive all if only she would stay. His emotions run amok, from incredulity and sadness, to pleading, to finally an ex-

plosion of anger. "What right," he screams, "do you have walking out on me and taking my child from me?"

Cox is painfully fair to both partners, and more importantly he builds them both sympathetically, making the drama more painful. Even for all John's nastiness (he goes so far as to tell Helen's parents of her affair), we can't hate the man, and similarly we understand Helen's dilemma perfectly.

But this is no tearjerker melodrama. Paul Cox infuses this drama with insight and realistic detail. The characters are fully developed, and his guiding direc-

torial hand has become sophisticated and subtle. Cox has grown astronomically as an artist since his sweet little *Lonely Hearts* of last year. His last film, *Man of Flowers*, proved to be a complex little comedy of wildly kinky proportions, but *My First Wife* is even better. The device of using fuzzy 8mm footage for flashbacks in *Flowers* has developed into subjective nightmares and daydreams for John and are poetic interludes from the highly charged scenes. The quirky characters of his early films have evolved into complex personalities that are an actor's dream, and Hargreaves and Hughes take up the challenge with

all of their resources, creating painfully believable people and fascinating characters.

My First Wife is an insight into human relations on the level of Bergman, but with a uniquely Cox mosaic of characters and a brilliantly sophisticated approach. Cox has done more than live up to his potential; he has exceeded all expectations.

—Sean Axmaker

Festival Notes

From Cinema 7's International Film Festival

Playing two days only, August 28 and 29, is an intriguing double feature showcasing films by two women directors. *Diary for My Children* is a fascinating study of early communist Hungary by native director Marta Meszaros. A surprisingly political film, it focuses on a strong-willed girl whose father was a victim of the Soviet purge and whose foster mother now is an inflexible party politician. Their clash of wills is handled superbly by Meszaros, and the political background is so scathingly analyzed that the film was delayed two years before finally released in its home country of Hungary.

Headlining the double bill is Chantal Akerman's *Les Années 80* (The Eighties), described in the *Village Voice* as a "deconstructionist musical." Though I haven't had a chance to screen this one, I have high hopes after her tour de force featured in last year's festival, *Jeanne Dielman*.

—Sean Axmaker

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AUGUST 23-27

My First Wife
A Film by PAUL COX

WINNER
BEST ACTOR
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1984 AUSTRALIAN ACADEMY AWARDS

Director: Paul Cox (Australia 1984) 35 mm 85 min.
Shows: Fri-Sat 7:30 & 9:30 pm; Sun. thru Tues. 7:00 & 9:00 pm; Sunday matinee 4:30 pm.

AUGUST 28-29
LES ANNEES 80
(The Eighties)

Director: Chantal Akerman (Belgium 1983) 35 mm 85 min.
Shows: 8:00 pm

Chantal Akerman's reputation as narrative avant-garde filmmaker has been likened to "in force and originality to Godard or Fassbinder" (Hoberman, *VILLAGE VOICE*). Her newest work is a homage to the big budget MGM type musicals: a flurry of rehearsals culled from 40 hours of material, unexpectedly blossoms into a series of production numbers set in some kind of shopping mall. "Akerman treats her film as if it were a dance and choreographs her 'steps' of motifs into an elegant but accessible ballet." *VILLAGE VOICE*

DIARY FOR MY CHILDREN
Director: Marta Meszaros (Hungary 1983) 35 mm 106 min.
Shows: 9:35 pm

"Marta Meszaros, one of the world's great women directors, was awarded the Special jury prize at the 1984 Cannes Film Festival for her fictional autobiography of childhood in Stalinist Hungary during the late 1940s and 50s."

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