

Lina's best rates caricature

By David Coursen

What would people say about a director whose gallery of female characters consisted almost entirely of whores, bitches and nagging housewives whose sole purposes in life seemed to be to torment, control and dehumanize the working class studs who love them?

And what if that same director's idea of humor were to show the revulsion of one of those studs at the prospect of sex with an (ugh) unattractive woman not just by showing the facial contortions with which the man registers his disgust but by using the distorting perspective of a fisheye lens to make the woman appear even fatter (i.e. more repulsive) than she actually is, in order to help the audience sympathize with the man as human and to laugh at the woman as an object?

And what if that same director had a fondness for rape scenes in which the women — foolish things — resist for a while but eventually succumb to the pleasures that can

only flow out of the loins of man?

And, finally, what if that director unashamedly and self-consciously (and often for no good reason) mimicked the styles and visual motifs of — to name a few — Antonioni, Fellini, and Bertolucci, and even plagiarized the color textures from Liliana Cavani's *The Night Porter*?

Well, if the director's name were Lina Wertmuller, people would call her a major new cinematic talent, the first distinctively female director in contemporary cinema. Of course, the viewer whose sole criteria for merit in film is the absence of sexism might do well to avoid most movies, and if imitating the work of other directors were prohibited, no films would have been made for forty or fifty years. But with Wertmuller, too often sexism passes for feminism, plagiarism for originality, and more to the point, cruelty passes for compassion and confusion for ambiguity.

Not only does Wertmuller take pains to show people being oppressed by their social or political

environments, but she examines their sufferings with such enormous gusto and enthusiasm that it's hard to avoid the suspicion that it's the suffering, not the oppression that is Wertmuller's real interest.

Thus the setting of *Seven Beauties*, a concentration camp in which one man drowns himself in a pool of shit and another collaborates with his Nazi keepers (and shoots his best friend) may be the definitive Wertmuller setting. The director's defenders would no doubt argue that her films present, but do not endorse, degradation and debasement. But that fish-eye shot (in *The Seduction of Mimi*) — extreme but by no means unique — plays physical deformity strictly for laughs and in so doing eloquently attests to the depth of Wertmuller's insensitivity.

Despite these limitations, Wertmuller has matured since *Mimi*, and, at her best, has a fine feel for the comic aspects of contemporary life, politics, and sexual mores, and a wild anarchic energy. Sometimes the limitations are still hard to ignore, and her political ambivalence still degen-

erates into simple confusion, but she has discarded — at least temporarily — that fish-eye lens, and, in her most recent film *Seven Beauties*, even showed a measure of compassion for her (male) characters.

All Screwed Up (made before *Swept Away* and *Seven Beauties* but only now opening in Eugene at Cinema 7) showcases Wertmuller's strengths and conceals her limitations perhaps as effectively as any of her films to date. Unfortunately, about halfway through the film there is a "comic" rape scene as insensitive as anything Wertmuller has done.

It seems that the victim — the provocateur — having refused to sleep with her loved one without marriage, or to marry him (note how the situation is so loaded our sympathies immediately to the man), finally gets what she deserves. During the assault, the woman resists until she finds her hands full with a falling television set; if she drops it, she may defend herself but the TV will surely be destroyed. This "comical" dilemma immediately trivializes the forcible sexual violation of a woman in several ways: the woman's values are so corrupt that, since she values a television set more highly than her sexual integrity, she more or less deserves to be raped. The act itself is not very violent and since the man is the woman's boy friend, the rape is not really rape anyway and immediately after the assault, Wertmuller lovingly pans over the woman's discarded clothing to the couple in an affectionate embrace, and the woman — who has, naturally, loved it — asks for more.

The woman is not here, as in *Swept Away*, actually made to beg for sex from the man, nor is she here transformed into a "real woman" by the incident, but in both films the patronizing treatment of the woman, her sexual identity, and her personal integrity is as vicious and insidious as comparable scenes from the work of any male director — even Russ Meyer, the King of the Nudies. In addition, in each rape scene Wertmuller totally identifies with

the male perspective or rather with male fantasies so macho they are not even shared by most men.

It's particularly unfortunate that such a completely offensive, gratuitous scene occurs in *All Screwed Up*. Aside from that, and other, less serious lapses, *All Screwed Up* is possibly Wertmuller's least offensive, most forceful film. The opening is a masterful example of evocative, efficient film-making; as two characters wander across an incredibly congested urban landscape, the audience experiences urban claustrophobia in an almost tactile way, and the only relief we get sets up an even more comically tangible intrusion of urban life into individual existence. The film is full of niceties like this opening and a perverse "dance" of the cadavers and workers in a slaughterhouse.

Still, while Wertmuller's nastiness, here as elsewhere, limits her characterizations to the superficial, it also gives her a vivid sense of caricature; my favorite example is a slimy gangster with a blonde streak in his hair. And of course the characters are meant to be this way, dehumanized by the conditions in which they are forced to live. In fact, characters that exist as ideas rather than people are ideally suited to play the role of abstract victims.

The energy, bite, and humor of *All Screwed Up*, suggest that, despite her limitations, Wertmuller does have genuine talent and that if she acquires a sense of human dignity, a measure of compassion for women as well as men, for the ugly as well as the beautiful, she may grow into the major artist her admirers claim she already is. But her most recent film, *Seven Beauties* celebrates survival, even purchased at the expense of human dignity, and a director who believes in survival above all is not likely to renounce the superficial malice that has won her such general commercial and critical success. In any case, *All Screwed Up*, — Wertmuller's least commercially successful film, may well be her most forceful, if not coherent, look at the pains and dislocations of modern life.

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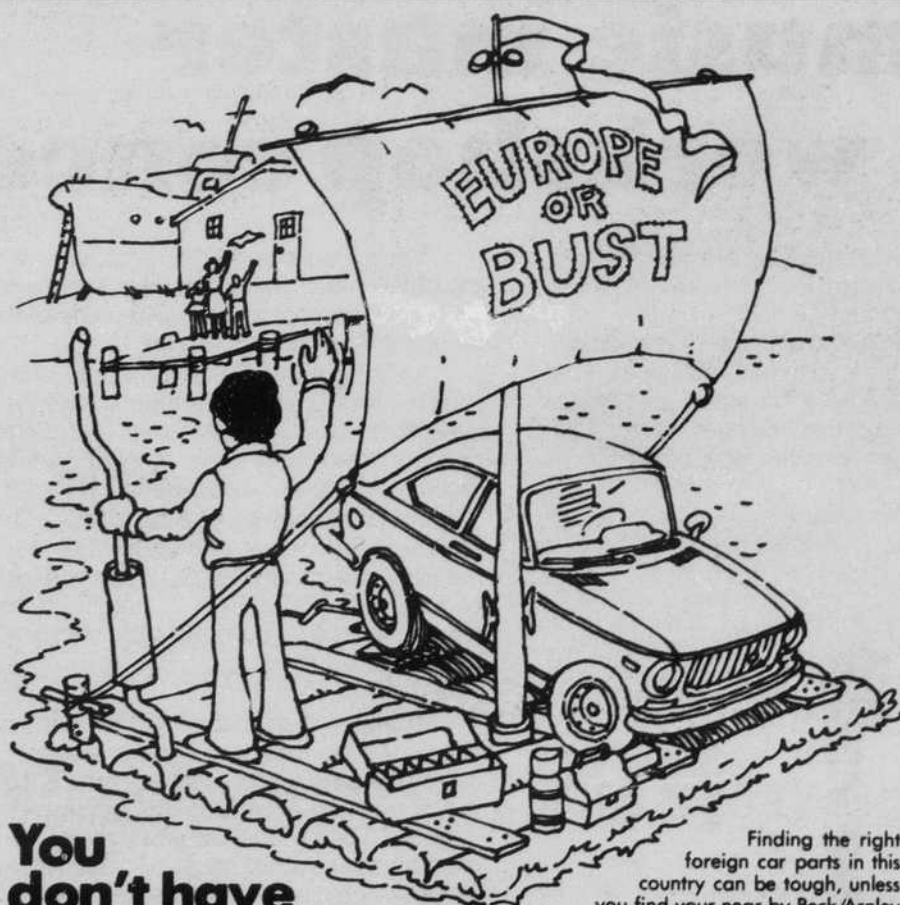
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All whose children?

The first three weeks of this column have dealt with the history of "All My Children." But from now on, the assumption is that people know the characters and the hassles they've dealt with over the last seven years.

Three weeks ago, we left Ann with her baby girl nestled nicely in her arms. While you'd never convince her of it, all is not well with Ann's baby. Tests results are in, and there is no doubt that the baby contracted toxoplasmosis while in the womb. While perfectly normal on the outside, there is at least some damage, though how much is not clear.

Ann, having adopted Erica's approach of simply ignoring that which is unpleasant, is slowly going off the deep end. When Beth (Elizabeth is the name of the newest Martin) developed a small sniffle, Ann held her to her breast and came away convinced that she loved the germs right out of Beth's small female form.

But there really hasn't been much action in that corner. Where it's really getting hot is between Linc, Kitty, and her ersatz mother. Mona Kane returned to Pine Valley Tuesday to find Linc and Doctor Charles waiting for her at the

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