

EATING RAOUL

Unsolved Murders, Unlimited Laughs

BY P. GREGORY SPRINGER

Paul and Mary Bland, just like Bonnie and Clyde before them, are (more-or-less) young and in love (although they sleep in separate beds). Also, they kill people.

Paul works in a liquor shop in a bad neighborhood until the connoisseur in him obsessively orders a case of \$500-a-bottle wine, and he's fired. Mary works in a hospital, ever at the mercy of lecherous patients. When the weirdos of Los Angeles begin to invade the sanctity of Paul and Mary's apartment, a scheme emerges. Why not entice these loathsome "perverts" with a want ad for swingers, hit them smartly over the head with a frying pan, and use the money in their pockets to finance a dream restaurant in the suburbs? Why not call it "Paul and Mary's Country Kitchen" and feature the Bland Enchilada?

A fine plan for people who are fed up. But, what to do with the bodies?

That's where locksmith/burglar Raoul unpredictably enters director Paul Bartel's new independent picture, *Eating Raoul*, a title which alone ensures originality to a film already sopping with sarcastic wit. When *Eating Raoul* is seen around the country this fall through Twentieth-Century Fox distribution, the delay and production headaches that went into its genesis should be quickly forgotten.

Eating Raoul makes Bartel's fourth excursion into mass murder, although the soft-shaped, balded and bearded 44-year-old from Brooklyn might be mistaken for a classical pianist or a sympathetic high school teacher. With a background of study in French and Italian, a cultural aesthetic which leans toward theater and opera, and a role on the selection committee of Filmex, Bartel's role as a director of mayhem and a manic comic actor make him one of the most contradictory figures in Hollywood today. In fact, Bartel's most recognizable role as an actor has been Mr. McGree, the music teacher, in *Rock and Roll High School*, a role he recalls with both fondness and agony.

"Do you remember the scene where the paper airplane with a note from the principal landed in my ear?" Bartel comments from his Los Angeles home. "It was an extremely painful experience. This cardboard airplane slid along a piece of monofilament anchored to a plug glued inside my ear, causing a terrible vacuum suction with a sort of implosion everytime the plane landed. It would bounce back, ruining the take."

In keeping with his elite ironic style, Bartel revealed that his favorite moments in film have all been portions of films he had either directed or acted in. Unlike those of any other cult director, Bartel's films all seem to inherit distinct and separate cults of followers, with very little overlap. His name is not a household word.

Private Parts (1972), his first fea-

ture, passed through the first-run circuit with record rapidity, but still does a "fairly constant business" through its 16mm distributor, UA Classics. "It's about a young runaway girl from Ohio who takes refuge in her aunt's rundown hotel in downtown LA," Bartel struggles to synopsise. "My mind is drawing a complete blank today. Anyway, there she encounters a series of sinister eccentrics, one of whom becomes her secret admirer but is responsible for the horrible fate in store for her."

Following *Private Parts*, Bartel went to work on *Death Race 2000* (1975) for Roger Corman, a film which inspired drivers around the country to joke about a "point" system for running down babies, nurses, and geriatric patients, the blackest of comic notions rooted in the reality of contemporary highway tactics. A then unknown Sylvester Stallone was one of the players.

It was for the filming of *Death Race 2000* that Bartel enlisted the talents of Mary Woronov, calling her from New York to star as one of the race victims. The former Warhol actress ("She was in *Chelsea Girls*, of course, in the Dark Ages") came out to Hollywood, and stayed.

Woronov made other pictures under the Corman umbrella, starring with Paul again in *Rock and Roll High School* as the wicked principal Miss Togar. Her friendship with Bartel and her statuesque proportions made her perfect for the part of Mary in *Eating Raoul*, the majestically towering nurse with a rigid sense of

propriety and a nose upturned at any hint of physical contact.

Mary (the part, not the actress) sleeps only with her stuffed doll, just as her husband Paul sleeps with a large bottle-shaped pillow labeled Lafitte-Rothschild 1961.

Why use Paul and Mary's real names in the script? "We are not in life anything like the Blands," Paul explains. "The reason I made the picture was that I wanted to work with Mary again, to see if we couldn't do something subtler and more sustained and complicated."

Eating Raoul begins with a gaudy pseudo-documentary montage of Los Angeles, resembling the newsreel style Paul originally worked with when he left the Army in the late Fifties. As the camera records a sign that reads *Piece O' Pizza — HAD A PIECE LATELY?* a voice-over laments that, in Los Angeles today, the distinction between food and sex has become blurred.

Despite a subsequent record of successful films, Bartel's difficulties in financing *Eating Raoul* are nearly legendary. He broke every rule, from the necessity of filming in segments he could afford — ten minutes here and ten there — to eventually putting up the money of his friends and family to get the picture finished, at a cost under \$1,000,000.

Eating Raoul bears some re-



Writer Richard Blackburn (left), director/actor Bartel (center) and the statuesque Ms. Woronov (right).

Blackburn, Hamilton Camp, ex-DJ the Real Don Steele, Buck Henry, and others) are a tight bunch of Hollywood peripherals. Blackburn, a sometime *Ampersand* contributor, spends much of his professional time in London, where he is in demand for rewrites, radio serials and wiggly original screenplays like the soon-to-be-shot *Slayground*. They all work and entertain together with a borderline incestuousness that Paul and Mary Bland's isolation would never allow. Bartel prizes working with his friends as the most important element (a unique one for most of Hollywood) in filmmaking. Twentieth-Century Fox, which eagerly agreed to distribute the independently made feature after it scored well at several film festivals, is betting on the rapport of these mavericks to gradually snowball *Eating Raoul* into a word-of-mouth hit.

Mary Woronov and Bartel are currently preparing to co-star in *Shake It Up*, a film about the Fillmore East rock showroom in the Sixties, directed by Alan Arkush, another in the clan of friends.

"I'll play a surgeon and Mary will play a lighting designer. I enjoy rock and roll, although it's not my favorite music. I enjoyed singing and dancing in Alan Arkush's *Rock and Roll High School*. Both Mary and I were also in Alan's *Heartbeeps*, a film destroyed by various studio executives who had just screened James Bond or *Superman* or something and made it very, very different from Alan's version. Somewhere, a cut does exist on his picture, which was scored with Mozart," Paul continues. "Maybe it will be shown someday."

As a member of the selection committee at Filmex, Bartel shows concern in getting film of all kinds seen. "Filmex is one of my great pleasures in life, permitting me to see a lot of films that never get theatrically released. It gives me the feeling that I can be instrumental in bringing films to the public that might not ordinarily get seen."

Regarding the culture of Los Angeles, Bartel admits he would like to spend more time in New York. "I like both coasts, but I hope I am able to film in New York some day."

In the meantime, he's contenting himself knowing that *Eating Raoul* has been invited to be screened in the New York Film Festival this fall, and he can take in some theater while he's there.

"I'm still singing the songs from Steven Sondheim's *Merrily We Roll Along*, the most interesting thing I've seen recently," stated the man who merrily leaves low-budget bodies in his cinematic tracks for the enjoyment of people who never remember his name.

His next film? "The title is *Scenes from the Class Struggle in Beverly Hills*."

Maybe it's a sequel.

semblances to other contemporary lifestyle parodies, such as John Waters' *Polyester* or Paul Morrissey's *Trash*. What differentiates it, according to Bartel, is a more commercially attuned script.

Eating Raoul takes the hypocrisy of certain "moral" attitudes, draws it to a murderous conclusion of logic, and makes it all seem as easy as toasting marshmallows.

Paul and Mary Bland take tips on their "business" from a homemaker, mother, and part-time sadist for hire, Doris the Dominatrix (Susan Saiger). After an unplanned rehearsal eliminates one drunken neighbor, Mary lures other sleazy victims with a variety of guises, dressing most uncomfortably as a Nazi, a disciplinary mother, a cartoon mouse (ears and all), and a hippie earth goddess blinded by a rented strobe light. Once the paying customers are in the proper mood, Paul clobbers them with cast iron cookware.

Raoul (Robert Beltran) carts off the bodies for mysterious purposes. Beltran, a bona-fide Chicano whose specialty is Shakespeare, adds tremendous juice to the film, discharging lines like, "Of course I'm crazy! I'm crazy about you Chiquita! I'm an emotional, hot-blooded Chicano!" After one windfall slaughter in a hot tub, Paul and Mary are able to retire quietly, happily ever after. The conclusion for the rest of the cast, however, turns out to be less satisfying.

One of the more delicious ironies of *Eating Raoul* is that the actors, technicians, and friends (including Roger Corman, co-script writer Dick