

is a case in point. For who would have thought his most reckless, least calculated, most anarchic, least sensible invention—the Monkees—might also prove to be his most profitable venture in show business? In re-runs now, those '60s programs account for some of Rafelson's liberty to go off to Africa or South America on research trips that haven't so far come together as packages.

He was also a key element in the 1968 founding of BBS (for Bert Schneider, Bob Rafelson and Steve Blauner), set up to produce a new kind of American feature film—on low budgets, on the road or in unusual locales, with tough, "real" material, new actors and unproven directors. Films like good novels. In less than three years, BBS gave the world *Easy Rider*, Peter Bogdanovich's *The Last Picture Show*, Bob's *Five Easy Pieces* and Henry Jaglom's *A Safe Place*. It gave us a new model for pictures and the first dry smiles of Jack Nicholson's stardom.

But what do you do if your urge to be yourself, to be difficult, to be apart from the system, still gives the system smash hits, Oscar nominations and a new kind of casual, insolent glamor epitomized by the scene in *Five Easy Pieces* where Nicholson tries to get the sandwich he wants? You have to work very hard to keep being as difficult as you know you must be. You have to keep insisting that your film isn't like others, isn't a remake of this or that safe success, isn't easily explained. The viewer has got to see it and puzzle it out.

Black Widow is a case in point. In description, it may remind you of *femme fatale* movies from the '40s—it does appear to be a struggle between a killer and a kind of cop, and no one could take you to court if you called it a psychological thriller.

This is from earlier in the day on the day before New Year's Eve, in the dubbing theater, amid the cigarette smoke that scorns the Fox "No Smoking" sign. Rafelson is refining an early passage of the movie, and it goes like this, without context.

We are in a bank vault. A woman appears, wearing a mauve dress: against all the polished steel, she's like an orchid in a saucepan. She is given a safe-deposit box—it must be hers—which she takes to a private room. She's alone, with the camera: we are voyeurs, and her accomplices. When opened, the box discloses money, jewelry and a case that contains a syringe and a capsule of clear liquid. The music trembles with the liquid. She zips open her black bag and takes out a sealed bottle of brandy. She primes the syringe and, with the utmost care and intelligent purpose, she injects the fluid through the seal and

into the bottle. As she works, there is a close-up of her hushed, attentive face, a close-up to fill the screen with amber, shadowed skin and masterful eyes. Whatever she's doing, we're with her, drawn to her skill and authority, which in her busy, intent silence, are as erotic as her eyes and mouth.

Next scene: a smart, split-level apartment. A man is there (Dennis Hopper), and he's looking for brandy. But it's all gone. So he calls upstairs to "Hon." And she appears: the same woman, in the mauve dress and flame-colored hair. She comes up to the railing on the upper level, leans on it and—so relaxed, so friendly—juts her left knee out a little so that the slit in the mauve silk widens and shows a touch of thigh. We are looking up, from his position. And then we are looking down on him, from hers.

"How come we run out of brandy so quick?" he asks her. He is plaintive, as well as looked down on.

She answers with another question: "Didn't I see a fresh bottle in the cabinet?" Butter wouldn't melt in her Southern mouth. But you can't see the mouth, because in the second big close-up the bottom of her mouth is in shadow. We can only see the hair, the skin and the eyes. But when he finds the fresh bottle and tells her she's right again, we hear a laugh, like a sigh, come from her, and an inward noise of intimate contentment. It looks like murder, but it sounds like kissing.

Cut to his funeral.

I shouldn't tell you more, except to say that this "she" is Theresa Russell, who plays a woman who collects and disposes of rich husbands. The other "she" in the film is Debra Winger, a Justice Department investigator who picks out the deadly pattern on her computer and sets out to find the killer. Let me add that the movie is not so much a thriller as the story of their relationship, in which there is as much love and friendship as there is menace. *Black Widow* is not a common picture, and it is not as clear-cut as its title. But you've got to call a movie something, and something the studio can sell.

In a dubbing theater, the film can be run back and forth, at will, with all the different soundtracks kept in sync so that alterations can be made. Rafelson and Bassman sit at a console about as wide as a tennis court. There's music in the scenes, less melodies than the emotive sounds of Theresa Russell's mind working. Rafelson is equally intent on the "scoring" of the sounds—the bump of the bottle on the table, the zip of the bag, the hiss of the syringe, the sound of the heels upstairs and the exact intonation of amusement in the mouth.

It is relentless, concentrated work. A

picture is air and light, but sound is the drug. And sound is so compelling and so difficult to achieve that it can make a director go blind, shutting his eyes to hear more closely.

"We edited for six months," says Rafelson. "Every scene, over and over, until you hate the sight of your own movie. But then with the sound it can come back to you—the pleasure, the excitement. It's a new movie again."

WHEN YOU SEE *Black Widow*, it will seem first and foremost a picture about Debra Winger and Theresa Russell, outsiders again, albeit ones the system has learned to cherish. Winger is often called the best young actress in pictures, but just as often she is regarded as "independent" and "demanding." Theresa Russell is an actress's actress—the profession knows how good she is. But she is based in England, where she lives with her husband, director Nicholas Roeg. Her American pictures are *The Last Tycoon*, *Straight Time* and *The Razor's Edge*, which is a way of saying not many Americans know who she is.

Rafelson's biggest battle with Fox was getting Russell. They weren't convinced she was "big" enough. Finally, Winger's blunt words were needed to say, without her, no me. And that's an oblique sign of the film's sense of sisterhood, of two women who might even, conceivably, have been played by the same actress. When Ron Bass wrote the script, he actually had Winger in mind for the role Russell now plays.

Black Widow will make Theresa Russell known: she plays four faces, or disguises, of one woman, a killer who truly loves those she kills. And Winger will be revealed as every bit as good as anyone has ever hoped for, for she plays a woman transformed. But all this is only possible because the script is about two very clever, challenging women and because Rafelson has insisted on a movie unlike others, one in which you can hear the two women breathe and think. In the end, everything in a movie—the images, the tracks, the art and the business—is a matter of whether we care to enter the minds of the ghosts on the screen. And every seven years, if he is lucky, tough and good, the outsider comes inside and brings with him some ghosts so gorgeous and mysterious you're not sure if you love them, or if they mean to kill you. ★

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