

## "Brother From Another Planet" and "The Fourth Man"

by Eleanor Malin

*The Brother From Another Planet* is nicely put together from beginning to end and is loaded with laughs, given the serious subject matter — racism. By now everyone must know the premise — a slave from another planet escapes on a space craft and lands on earth on Ellis Island. He cannot speak, possibly a condition imposed upon him because of his enslavement. He looks much like the rest of the black men in Harlem where he ends up, except that he has three toes on each foot. One foot was missing on his arrival, and he had to regenerate it himself his first night on earth. He is superior to earthlings in several ways — an uncanny knack to fix machines by touching them. He is also a sensitive, able to see, feel, and hear things the rest of us are unable to perceive, both past and present. He is being pursued by a couple of space m.p.'s, dressed in black, stiff looking guys who track him with the aid of some kind of interplanetary dictionary and culture manual.

Director, John Sayles, who plays one of the m.p.s, gets a lot of mileage out of juxtaposing characters of different backgrounds and points of view.

At a neighborhood tavern where several scenes are set, the space trackers are shown to be laughable, and draw immediate distrust from the regulars. At a later time, two white guys from out of town duck into the bar looking for directions to the subway. They are uneasy, and in trying to fit in they also look foolish. They might just as well be from

another planet.

Not speaking gives the part of the Brother more potential, and Joe Murphy does a super job of portraying this interplanetary fugitive. The costumes are great, the cast is excellent, down to the smallest roles, and, best of all, though this is a "message" movie, it is always entertaining. The misadventures the hero goes through, the colorful characters he meets and the satisfying resolution of the story makes this a great flick. Don't miss it.

*The Fourth Man*, which played around town during November and December, is the perfect movie to go to if you are liberal, agnostic and/or of a literary bent. Written and directed by the man who gave us *Soldier of Orange*, (a wonderful war movie), the thoroughly engrossing plot is played out through a series of literary techniques. Presented as they are in filmic form, they work beautifully. We find out in the beginning that the main character in the story is homosexual, an alcoholic, and that he has vividly imagined fantasies. He imagines he has killed his young lover: in the next scene, the young man is again playing his violin, coolly informing the main character (an author), that he'll have to take the train to his lecture, it's the young man's turn to use the car. At the train depot, the author sees a hunk of a young guy in the magazine shop, is smitten, and follows him out to the train. The young man departs on the train to Cologne, and the author goes off to his lecture in a little town on the coast (of Holland).

While on the train he sees vivid images, so intense he thinks they might be real.

This movie is even more visual than most movies. The images are all of startling things, like a poster for a hotel that, next view, has blood on it. Blues and reds are the main colors used throughout these episodes, and details from one set of images will occur in another.

At the train station, the author approaches a man dressed formally, and inquires if he is

the person sent from the literature club to meet him. The man turns out to be an undertaker and he is picking up a casket. The author thinks the ribbon on the casket has his name on it, but the undertaker pulls up the ribbon, and some missing letters appear to form another name, "Hermann."

At the lecture, the author is filmed by a young woman dressed in red with a movie camera. At the intermission, she invites him to her home and he asks about provisions for a hotel room. She says they have a reservation for him at the town's finest hotel. He looks across the street at the hotel, and it is the same one in the poster earlier — not only that, it's the same night view as on the poster. He tells the young woman he will stay with her if he misses the last train, and since it's important to the plot, of course, he misses the train.

The young woman drives him to her place, a mansion by the seashore, with a deluxe beauty salon and luxurious living quarters inside. The neon sign has some letters out. It's supposed to say "Sphinx," but it says "Spin," — the Dutch word for spider — instead. Another little word game and set piece where missing letters fall into place.

That night the young woman seduces him. He has a dream the woman has emasculated him with a pair of barber shears. In the dream, she is wearing green fingernail polish. The woman awakens him and he is relieved to see it is a dream, which we know right away, because she is wearing red fingernail polish. In the next scene, it is morning, she is wearing a green uniform and painting her nails the same seafoam green as in his dream.

This woman seduces the man materially when she invites him to live with her, and showers him with gifts. One gift is a shirt that once belonged to her late husband.

She gets him to stay a few more days by leaving an 8 x 10 glossy photograph of the young man he had seen at the train station (in a red bikini), as bait. His name is Hermann. If there was anyone in the audience who had not had any suspicions about this woman, they sure did by now.

The young woman goes to Cologne to get the young man and bring him to her home, with the unspoken promise that the author will have a chance to enlighten him sexually. The young man is a gay basher, but the author seduces him anyway. But just in his moment of triumph, the author looks around and sees they are in the crypt containing the ashes of the spider woman's three loving husbands who have gone before. The previous night, he had stumbled upon movies the woman had left accessible, and they were

movies of the three weddings and the three unfortunate husbands. One died in a parachute jump, (in that section, the young woman is shown with scissors, jokingly pretending to cut the lines. In another scene, the young husband gets out of the car (she is shown in the car — just *who* is taking these movies?) in a jungle zoo environment, and is killed by a lion. In the third scene, the young husband takes off in a boat and is drowned when someone in a speedboat capsizes his craft.

Now, the author is drunk when he sees these movies, and we wonder if he is enhancing these moving images from the alcohol or from his author's imagination. If the woman did edit these movies down to the wedding, then the death scenes, might she then be *very* strange?

Anyway, they are in the crypt because the author saw a woman he had seen earlier in a vision and he followed her. He had seen the door to the crypt in the same vision, and the woman (in a blue coat) in the crypt, with three hanging beef carcasses.

The author, now in a state of panic, decides to get out of there right away.

I'm dying to tell you the rest, but will exercise a lot of restraint and just say that at the end, we are left wondering if the young woman is a witch, or if the author has flipped out because of the alcohol or his authorhood. His thinking she is a witch, after all, might only be a manifestation of his mistrust for women. On the other hand, a female character who appears throughout the movie in different guises, turns up as the nurse in the emergency room. The author thinks she must be the Virgin Mary, come to warn him about the witch. Maybe she represents the other side of the female character to the author. The characters this woman plays are benevolent, but enigmatic.

She says she is not Mary. The doctor's middle name, however, is Maria, and he's a Catholic with six children. But he thinks the author has gone mad. The doctor is the man who met the author at the train to escort him to the lecture. He knows about the three unfortunate accidents and he knows about the author's alcoholism and the weak-mindedness brought on by his authorhood. He sympathizes with the woman for her heartbreak, and suspects the author of diminished capacity.

This movie is witty, beautifully filmed, well acted, not a frame is out of place. It is best seen with a friend, however, as there will be lots of questions you'll want to ask *someone*, and you'll want to compare notes.

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