

Jill Godmilow and "Waiting for the Moon"

Woman is a woman is a woman

BY ELEANOR MALIN

"I just want people to like my movie," says Jill Godmilow, director of *Waiting for the Moon*, now playing at the 5th Avenue Cinema. "I don't want to be remembered in a lineup of directors at a Women's film series; I want to be thought of as a good film director."

Cinema

She observes that everyone wants to know what John Huston is working on now — no one asks about Susan Seidelman.

My first reaction to Godmilow's film about Alice B. Toklas and Gertrude Stein was one of bewilderment. The situations are made up out of whole cloth. Godmilow has Stein and Toklas in their 40s, when they were actually much older during that time period. She has them motoring to a picnic with Fernande, Picasso's mistress, decades after they had separated. Another picnicgoer was Guillaume Apollinaire, a French poet, who by then had been dead of war wounds for many years. Later, Apollinaire supposedly dies of mushroom poisoning, leaving his pretty country girl mistress and her newborn son — born totally of creative imagining. In the film, Toklas and Stein decide to keep baby Willi and raise him themselves.

At first I tried to assign symbolic values to some of the goings-on, and the baby seemed a prime suspect for a symbol of the fruits of their friendship, as translated through their relationships with the artists of the time — basically everybody who was anybody, their lovers and friends.

Upon reflection, however, it seems that what is required is that nothing is required. Surrender is the key word here. The baby can be a symbol or not, depending on your mood or relative grasp of, or lack of, security.

I told Godmilow I had wracked my brain to try and think of another film about famous people that had used such license, and had been unable to think of even one. She immediately named *Amadeus*, which went every which way, and also made no pretense of being accurate, or caring about it. I had disliked the film for that. I didn't know any of the details of Mozart's life, and was made to feel insecure watching the proceedings. Still in all, as Godmilow says, "Once you have cast a part, you have made a statement about the material," and that's true. Those western "heroes" surely couldn't have been so ruggedly handsome, or so heroic. Bonnie and Clyde were not anything like Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway.

Actually, in her casting and her fanciful handling of details, Godmilow has arrived at a product which rings true. She chose to emphasize the relationship of the two wo-



Jill Godmilow.

men. There is a lot of conflict, most of which revolves around an illness Stein supposedly has, which could be fatal. She doesn't tell Toklas, who feels betrayed by the lack of communication. There ensues something like a life-and-death struggle over the direction of the relationship. Who owes who, and what does she owe her?

And there is not one iota of sex shown here, a matter which may seem like abnegating directorial responsibility by some younger filmgoers. Godmilow says she left out the sex because it would be exploitation, too easy. That answer seems legitimate enough to me. As it stands, the potential audience will not be diminished by the depiction of sex scenes which might make older or more conservative viewers uncomfortable. If this seems unfair to you readers, it is, but that's the way it really is.

Toklas and Stein are two of the most famous celebrity figures from this century, and Godmilow has done us a favor by recreating something from (or like) a portion of their lives. She wanted to make a movie about them, she used what she wanted to use, and though she approaches the project from a seemingly self-indulgent point of view, it does hold up, just not by any pre-ordained standard. It's a whole new ball game, and might give one pause to question the crushingly pre-ordained standard.

Godmilow says her film was called, "a most feminine film," by a woman reviewer. I had mentioned the word "womanly" and "reposeful." She thought "reposeful" was accurate.

Much of the merit in this project is enhanced by the careful casting. Godmilow says she scoured the country for 6 months, looking for someone who could play Stein. She finally settled on Linda Hunt, as probably the only actress in America who could play the part. Academy-award winner Hunt (for Best Supporting Actress for the part of the Indonesian dwarf male, Billy Kwan in *The Year of Living Dangerously*), however, had designs on the Toklas part, and asked for that; it's a bigger and better part, with more difficult material. Hunt suggested Linda Bassett, an English stage actress with whom she had worked (in *Aunt Dan and Lemon*, written for Hunt by Wallace Shawn of *My Dinner With Andre*) for the Stein part.

Bassett fills the role nicely, her close-cropped haircut being enough to convincingly suggest the persona of Stein. She handles the lines with a passivity, or "waitingness" that seems to me somehow feminine, and somehow exactly as I have thought Stein would be.

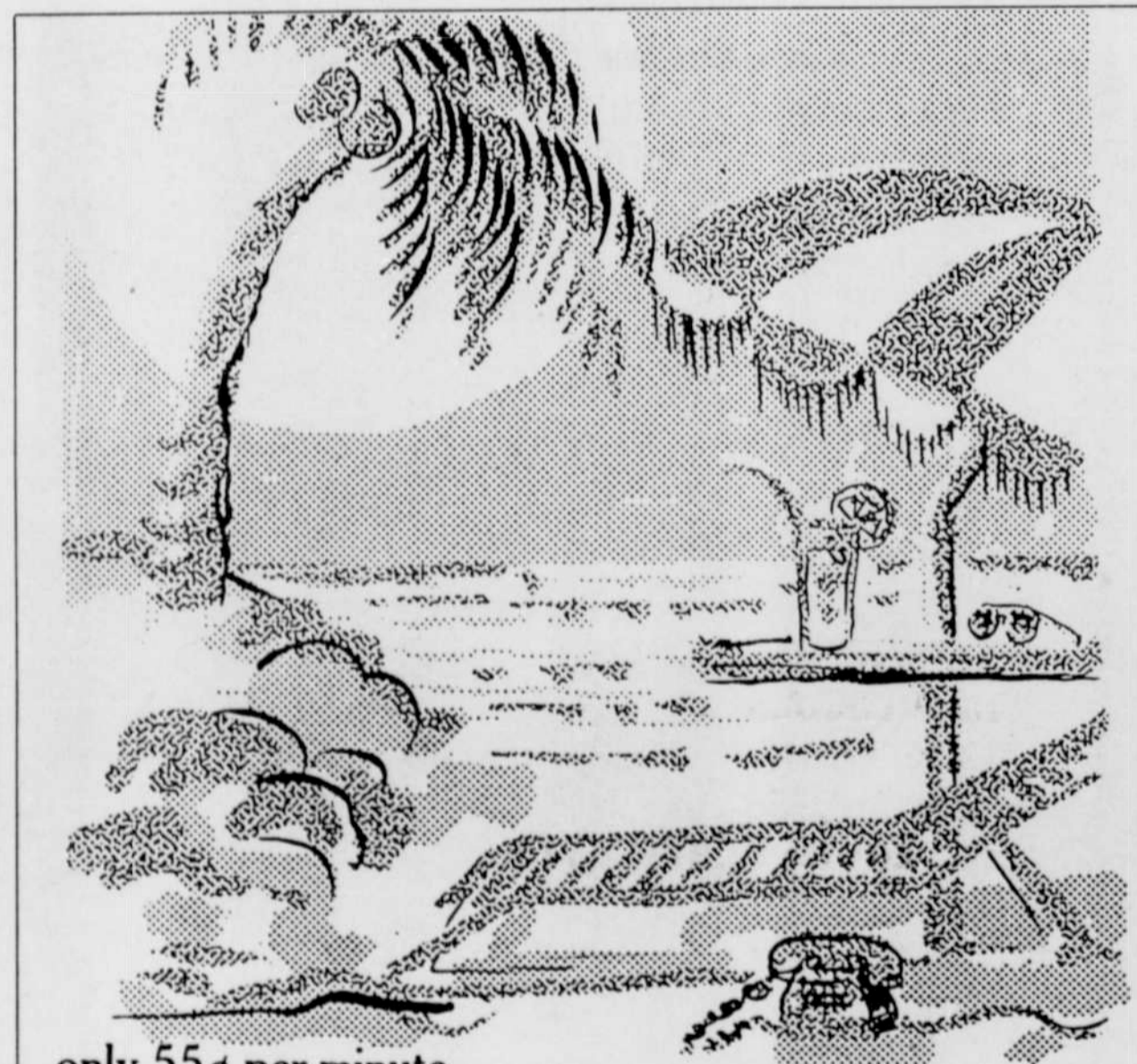
Bruce McGill, who played D-Day in *Animal House*, and who has done a lot of TV (a recurring role this season in *MacGyver*) — a good part last season in *Magnum, P.I.*), does a pretty good Ernest Hemingway. A solid and under-utilized character actor, McGill is good every time out, and he was really tickled to finally get a long speech in a movie, (and he makes the most of it).

Godmilow started making films in the '60s. She had a Latino boyfriend, a painter and high school dropout (not mutually exclusive). They went to see a lot of movies, during the time when America was being bombarded with foreign films. Her boyfriend suggested they make a film, "Uneducated people are like that, they think you can just do it," she says. They borrowed \$1000 from a Physics professor of hers, who thought she was special, and \$1000 from his mother, who was a bookie, and shot their film, making every cinematic error known to man. I suggested she get off cheap, having learned all she needed to know for \$2000 bucks (see how far that would get you in a college film class today).

Having the film now all in a box, ready for editing, Godmilow knocked on many doors in New York, finally landing a job editing commercials. She became well-known for her editing, and over the years was able to do editing to support herself while she worked on her own projects. She directed *The Vigil*, with Chiquita and Andre Gregory (the Andre of *My Dinner with Andre*), about the Polish theatre group "Teatr Laboratorium." That's the famous group Gregory discusses in *My Dinner with Andre*, for all you trivia buffs, and the tack taken by Godmilow was influenced by their work, where it's not so much what really happened, or what's right or wrong, but what works and what doesn't.

Waiting for the Moon has a foreign film quality about it. It's pretty; it's gentle. I think it renders Toklas and Stein in a way that they would appreciate. I had a good time at this movie, though it was so feminine and so different from films I have seen to date, that it threw me for a while. In retrospect, it seems that cinematic offerings on all subjects, even on women, famous or fictional, have been so relentlessly white, male and heterosexual, that there's no niche at all for this sort of work.

Can the audience appreciate and warm up to a film about two famous lesbians, though there's no sex, and not much foundation in fact? Reviewers have been hedging, leaving it up to the audience (which it always is, anyway). It's possible the same set of people who have been complaining about the sex-and-violence formula will still not like this legitimately different approach. Possibly because they are so used to the very formula they decry, they might miss familiar elements. If women spend a lot of time complaining men get all the goodies, and no one considers the efforts of women, then they should at least consider this movie. Stuff happens, calmly, but it happens. The acting is good, the story holds together. There's a charm; it's reposeful, but there's charm. And I left the film wanting to read some Gertrude Stein.



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