

stands to pick up oats for her chickens. 'Let her do her own oating,' he would rap out in a terrified aside . . . *Reflexion faite*, why should not we all do our own oating? I have in the press at present a work, which will shortly appear, on the lines of *Every Man His Own Lawyer*, to be entitled *Every Man His Own Berenson*.

Osbert Sitwell's 50-page 'short character' of Sickert, introducing the man and his writings, is not only an integral part of the book in the sense that it sets the background for the whole, but a magnificent piece of writing in itself - marvellously funny and perceptive, even though it may present a rather rose-coloured picture of its subject. Judging by other accounts, I can't help believing that Sickert was an innately harder or more impersonal human being than his sparkle and *joie de vivre* suggest. Sometime

at the turn of the century Max Beerbohm noted nimbly in his Mr Jingle shorthand:

Sickert - his charm for all women - Duchess or model - kind, shrewd, then domineering . . . two sides - like Shaw. Cruel mouth - kind eyes. Extreme refinement - love of squalor.

This certainly seems to get at the core and chimes with Sickert's grim-gay division of humanity into 'two categories, the invalids and the nurses'. (Remember Denton Welch's inimitable account of how his doctor asked the painter to visit Welch, who was recovering from a serious accident, and how Sickert stormed down the street shouting 'I have no time for district visiting!') Certainly the reader who puts down this book - 'Come again when you can't stop quite so long!' - will agree that he still has time for the experienced magician.

manner of Lamb's Lytton Strachey, while Pork reminisces, masturbates with an egg-beater and rolls about a bed with two naked youths, who have faces like Rossetti angels and pubic hair coloured bright turquoise. Other characters appear to talk of this and that, mostly *that*. A nun's breasts are fondled by a pupil; a Lesbian sets fire to an onanist in a cinema; there's a long discussion about the size of children's testicles, another on varieties of excrement and others on the delights of coprophilia; a pubescent tart trips, squeaks and wriggles; a bald, unsmiling person clad only in black netting drinks absinthe - an androgynous apparition, like the male granny called Vulva and several others.

At first you think you're hearing Isherwood offer a much more explicit invocation of Sally Bowles's doings in Berlin, and by the end you feel you're sharing Beardsley's madder fantasies; and perhaps that's why the effect is so inoffensive, at times almost endearingly so. 'A real pervert called me!' cries a girl, 'My first!' Her enthusiasm informs the evening. Warhol approaches his scatological erotica as he painted that famous Campbell's soup can, with a sort of callow wonder, untouched by moral bias of any kind. Look, fellatio! Wow! Look, a real live dyke, in a yellow jacket! Isn't that *fantastic*? It might indeed be a transatlantic version of that salacious, innocent boy so admired by Wilde - the Yellow Book made *Flesh*, so to speak. I can't remember an evening in the theatre that struck me as so literally childish.

Pork is (naturally) at the Roundhouse; at the Theatre Upstairs, there's Athol Fugard's *Boesman and Lena*, about two warring Cape coloureds 'resettled', i.e. thrown onto the road. It's a grim, painful, powerful piece of which I hope to write more; and the over-rated revival of *Show Boat* (Adelphi) will also have to wait until a thinner week.

ARTS

School for Senility

BENEDICT NIGHTINGALE

Anyone who doubts the aptness of *The Old Boys* (Mermaid) would do well to turn up a letter published in last Saturday's *Times*. The signatory was actually a Tory MP called Stokes, but it could well have been one of William Trevor's characters, spouting about their favourite subject. Public schools, it seems, are desperately needed for the religion, morality, decency, fair play, honesty, leadership and strength of character they alone properly impress on their pupils. And do they divide the nation? Not at all, declared Stokes, adding with odd sense of consistency that 'after 25 years in personnel time and time again businessmen when wishing to recruit a new manager will say to me words to this effect, "find me a public school type who gets on with everyone and is trusted everywhere".' The proof of the pudding was in the eating, he explained, and the enemies of this pudding were riding 'a horse which will certainly not run in 1971'.

So much for shifty grammar school jobs, like Ted Heath. There's an unappetising pudding for you. If Trevor's people were to catch him in his yachting cap on the front of some resort they'd permit themselves, at most, a tight, frigid smile each. 'Funny little man', one would say, and 'counterjumper', another would agree; and they'd continue to swap the same anecdotes about H. L. Dowse, 'the housemaster of the century', they'd been enjoying for the past 40 or 50 years. 'Divisive' is inadequate to describe the effect of their education. It started by subtracting them from society and it went on to deaden their ability to do much thereafter but remember itself. That was the time they won trophies and felt free to thump their inferiors. They weren't just the happiest days of their lives: they were the only ones. Hence the concern they feel now for the old boys' association, the cord that keeps them attached to this second, more prehensile womb.

There are Sole and Cridley, huddled together like old maiden hens, and there's Swabey-Boys, who spends his last years doing jigsaws. Above all, there's Jaraby, mocked by his wife while he lectures his unsatisfactory son on the school reports he

got a full 25 years ago. His ambition is to be association president, and the play mainly describes how he's thwarted, by a private detective in the pay of Nox, who still broods about the drubbings he received as Jaraby's fag. It is a sad, funny business, conducted in disconcertingly mannered dialogue, as if *Sialky and Co.* were pretending to have been written by Jane Austen; and yet quite unpatronising. Trevor handles his upper-crust derelicts with a respectful sympathy, and ends the play by having them sink their differences and make a dramatically implausible but entirely dignified request for the consideration proper to the old and lonely. At this point they speak, and stand, for anyone whose life has been hobbled by mishandling at an age when he was too young to understand or resist.

One wouldn't hesitate to recommend it all, were it not for Alan Strachan's production, which is unimaginative and unsubtle, and Michael Redgrave's performance in the leading part. He may, of course, come to remember his lines, which will help; but where I differ from my nicer colleagues is that I still can't see the makings of a sound structure behind the scaffolding he offered us on opening night. Jaraby has evidently achieved nothing since school, and his only vaguely fulfilling relationship appears to be with his cat. He is a man who has been crushed, desiccated and left to moulder, like old peel; and yet there's something in the way Sir Michael speaks and moves - a solidity, strength, even resilience - that belies his deaf aid and tentatively perched spectacles. 'Shall Nox who washed the egg-stains off my plate dare to answer me back,' he roars, and indeed still might be head of house. Time and disappointment have hardly raddled him: he doesn't begin to resemble the failure he's supposed to have become. He's wrong, and so, consequently, is the play.

'Pork' is a New York chick who shoots drugs, has had two abortions and lovers of both sexes, and is watched throughout the play that bears her name by a man made up to look like our author, Andy Warhol. He sits with a tiny, crooked smile on his dough-face, draped down a chair after the

FILMS

Lascivious Deadpan

JONATHAN RABAN

More news from the cinema of nastiness. Juraj Herz's brutal gothic comedy *The Cremator* (Venus, Kentish Town) begins with a pile of naked corpses arranged as tastefully as sprays of dog-roses on your bedroom wallpaper; a dream of death as ordered and pure as a line of sentimental verse, or a parade of flaxen-haired Hitler Jugend. The film was made during the last days of the Ducek regime in 1968, and it's a lip-smacking exploration, or maybe exploitation, of the roots of Nazism in kitsch - in the chintzy, animal-loving, soft-spoken, blue-eyed lower middle class in Czechoslovakia in the 1930s. The cremator, Mr Kopfrkingl, is played by Rudolf Hrusinsky with an extraordinarily horrible economy of gesture. His spongy, porcine face is topped by a pair of school-boy NHS spectacles, and when he smiles his lips purse into a squashed square of marshmallow. Combing the hair of a dead girl in an ornate open casket, he absent-mindedly transfers the comb to his own thinning pate. Later, he is combing the hair of his children; the movement is repeated, and we see the dim flicker of a prophetic memory disturbing

his pale eyes behind their thick lenses. 'Do you like Strauss?' he inquires at intervals through the film, in the wheedling voice of a demented sweetshop proprietor.

Herz's direction borrows its style from the gruesome obsessions of this wet-eyed monster. The camera gloats over ornament and detail in the same, slow, bovine way as Kopfrkingl. A matchstick twirled inside a waxy ear, the grinding-out of a cigar butt, the baroque curlicue of a coffin lid, a bathroom tap, the cuts of meat on a butcher's slab, an entomologist's collection of flies in a glass case – these are the primary, visible objects of a society narcissistically devoted to its own products. Food and death are symbolically associated – bread and cremation, as Kopfrkingl remarks, both require ovens – and the film dwells over long munchy family meals. Carp, 'fried on our little furnace', are picked down to bones while the chomping faces of the Kopfrkingls and their Nazi friend themselves take on a fishy, silent glaze. When the cremator takes his family out for entertainment, it's to a boxing match or a waxwork chamber of horrors. For himself, there's the brothel, and his weekly visit to his doctor for a VD blood test.

Since Mrs Kopfrkingl is half-Jewish, she has to be done away with. The cremator lovingly hangs her from their bathroom skylight: 'I think the bathroom is our most attractive room'. His gangling son – played with unblinking reptilian innocence by Milos Vognic – is beaten to death with a crowbar in the crematorium, and Herz hoses the blood from the sanitised marble floor. Meanwhile he feeds and fondles the cat and muses on the sufferings of the troop horses in the Great War. Only occasionally does Herz let up on the lascivious deadpan of the film's basic style, and then it's to reveal Kopfrkingl's face as seen through a fish-eye lens – a swollen gargoyle with a vast nose and vestigial ears like fleshy tufts. There's a studied facility about these techniques that brings the film dangerously close to being an example of the same cancerous kitsch it sets out to pillory.

Once it was the rise and fall of dynasties that used to afford narratives without benefit of art. Now it's pop concerts. You bug a stadium with cameras, and let it all happen; then the close-cropped wizards of the editing studio splice together miles of film and mess about with the colour processing. Like so many pop records, the movies that result from this alchemy are a technicians' genre; studio miracles whose artlessness and deceptively *vérité* air have an elaborately cooked-up flavour. *Gimme Shelter* (Rialto) is the scissored and crocheted version of what went on when the Stones gave their free concert at Altamont, California. But what really happened – freak-outs, stabbings, deaths, births, hippies musing up Angels' bikes and Angels musing hippies in return – was so far away from the clever tricks of the studio that the film breaks up around an unacknowledged incongruity. The cameramen (it took a team of 22) affectionately fill their frames with electronic gear: there are full-length portraits of a beefy entrepreneur's open phone system, of the fans' Yashicas and Rolleis, of mikes and tape-recorders and amplifiers and buzzing monitor screens. But technicians only really love their own sorts of technology: interestingly, there's not a single good shot of a customised bike, though the shape of both the film and the event cries out for one. Mick Jagger has the best lines. Looking like a Picasso pirot under ultra-violet, he croons

petulantly at the rioting crowd: 'Cool out, people, please cool out. We can get it together . . .' A positively Churchillian appeal for unity. Looking in at a replay of the scene in the studio, he clucks at the monitor: 'Oh, that's sad.' It was, too.

Making It (Carlton) doesn't. It attains a lugubrious climax when its hero, a pert 17-year-old, is forced to witness the abortion he's fixed up for his mother. Both of these people are, we're told, in search of self-knowledge, and certainly they're in dire need of that useful commodity. The screenplay has the unhappy air of having once been found witty by someone, and lurches from wry exchanges to revealing incidents like the college edition of *The Lucy Show*. The standard hand of references, from James Joyce to the *I-Ching*, is flashed, but takes no tricks. The direction looks as if it was done over a long distance phone, perhaps by the grizzled boss-man of Altamont. It's all as faked and fatty as ex-WD butter-substitute.

TELEVISION

Vishnupland

EDWARD LUCIE-SMITH

I looked forward to Yavar Abbas's *Ganga Mayya* (BBC-2, last Sunday) with unusual curiosity, not merely because it was the work of a distinguished director, but because it was a film about India made by an Indian. True, Abbas has lived in Britain since 1949. Nevertheless, one expected him to have a very different perspective with regard to the sub-continent and her people. Films made by Europeans, such as Louis Malle, have aroused bitter protest in India itself, and the BBC in particular has been accused of showing that which is not to the country's credit – poverty, squalor and corruption.

In the event, I expected slightly too much. This was a ravishingly beautiful film, but the direction did not have the finesse of Malle's. Its effects were more academic. Abbas showed us, for example, some footage of Indian ascetics meditating upon the rocks which overlook the Ganges as it passes through the foothills of the Himalayas – and nothing could have been more exotic, or more in the style of the most romantic Indian miniatures. But Malle could do as much with material that was less obvious – I recall one shot of women folding long strips of cloth that had just been dyed, in which the ritual and the ordinary were mysteriously blended.

The main disappointment, however, was that the place itself remained as obstinately inaccessible to the mind as in every other glimpse of it. Here were all the expected touches – vultures and jackals devouring the corpses that float in to the bank of the Ganges; a peasant woman squatting on that same bank to give suck to her child; then a noisy fairground and an equally noisy religious procession. Certain emphases, and certain tactful omissions, told us that we were indeed in 1971. There was, for example, a tendency to stress the Muslim community – we caught a glimpse of the most distinguished Indian musician in the sacred city of Benares, who is a Muslim; we took a slightly more prolonged look at a carpet factory where the workers are by tradition Muslims, and use designs inherited from the Persian court of Shah Abbas. And, while there were

cripples and beggars enough, Abbas had no disposition to make us smell the real stench of Indian poverty – instead, we learned how much better off the peasants were now that they mostly owned their own land.

The upshot was that though I enjoyed watching the images captured for me by the camera, India is remote and alien, just as always. I felt precisely the same lack of involvement, looking at *Ganga Mayya*, as I felt when watching all that live coverage of activity on the moon, though not, fortunately, the same degree of boredom. On Monday night, as ITN replayed that miserable little length of footage of the lift off from the moon ('and now in slow motion!') for the umpteenth time, I came as near as I have ever done to smashing the set in petulant rage. May we be spared other such spectaculars for a very long time.

In fact, it was left to dear, plodding old *Panorama* (BBC-1) to save Monday evening, not merely with the confrontation between Messrs Wedgwood Benn and Davies, but with an excellent, absolutely straightforward piece about new methods of dealing with young offenders – by using the probation service more intelligently rather than by locking them up. This was strictly meat and two veg., but it put a point of view forcefully and convincingly. The idea of television as a public service is not quite dead when something like this can be screened at peak time.

RECORDS

Swallowing Words

PETER PORTER

If any opera were designed to prove that words of a libretto are the occasion of the drama and not beautiful poems in their own right, it is Benjamin Britten's *The Rape of Lucretia*. For years, I have been able to quote lines of Ronald Duncan's libretto by heart, yet I think it contains some of the worst poetry ever created for the musical theatre. It would be churlish to press this, were it not that a new generation of enthusiasts (including the commentator in the notes accompanying the complete recording) is anxious to rehabilitate Duncan. His critics, we are told, are unused to libretti in verse. A better way of putting it would be that they are embarrassed by overblown doggerel masquerading as verse. Fortunately, if one loves the music one can turn the text. Stravinsky-wise, into syllables and swallow it that way.

But already I've strayed from my main point about libretti. They are only as good as the music they occasion, and the music of *The Rape of Lucretia* sounds as beautiful now as it did in 1946, as the new Decca recording proves (SET 492-3, £4.98). *Lucretia* is Britten at the height of his invention. The vitality of the music is remarkable: it makes all considerations of style, and historical perspectives of the Boulez sort, merely superficial. A short way of pointing to this is to examine Britten's economy of effect. He has to tell the story of the rape of a Roman matron by her overlord, and he has, as help or hindrance, two chorus-figures who relate Roman and Etruscan history, and also interpret the drama through Christian eyes. Yet the opera is quite short, no longer than its far-off relation, *Owen Wingrave*. Within this