

BABBLE

by Michael Ventura

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Once upon a time, in a town far far away, I went to the movies for a living. The town was perched inconveniently and conspicuously upon a fault line, wedged between the desert and the sea, where it was and is a good town for over-heated imaginations and a better town for shysters buying the souls of the over-heated. My soul was on the market too, but, as I've sometimes been told, it's an "old soul," long out of fashion, as difficult to sell as it is to live with. If your soul won't sell in Fault-Line City it won't sell anywhere and you'd best find other wares to peddle. (Sometimes we're kept honest simply by the gift of being unfit for mass consumption.) Anyway, not to stray too far from where this paragraph began, I was a film critic.

Hardier souls can make film criticism a life's work, but my old soul tired after a few thousand movies and I reached a point where, for some years now, it's rare for me to see more than three movies per annum. Maybe five. Mostly pictures in which the world almost ends. But I don't go for the movie, I go for the movie theater. To sit with strangers in the dark again. Eat popcorn. Watch imaginations overheat and (usually) stall. But lately the novel I'm writing has been moving glacier-like at about a paragraph a night and I've clocked many miles pacing my apartment; in my resultant desperation I've been going to any movie that isn't animated and isn't a comedy (the strain of guffawing is bad for my heart). I mean to see one movie a day, more or less, until the year runs out or until I run out of the theater (not screaming, I don't scream, but perhaps yelling). But, misled by its print ads, the first movie I saw turned out to be a comedy after all and it endangered my heart considerably. By the time those angelic little white kids got lost in the desert I'd long passed the point where I could stop laughing.

To restore my health and get back to work I must tell you about this comedy. Writers do that, they inflict their afflictions upon the unsuspecting and expect payment in return. That's why we make poor spouses.

This comedy inter-cuts four story-lines. I'll take them one at a time. We open in a generic Islamic middle-of-nowhere desert -- it's Morocco, but it could be anywhere Islamic and deserty. There's this straight-out-of-central-casting Third World peasant family. Everyone eats with their fingers and nobody's very bright. Pop is so dumb that when he trades a goat for a rifle he gives the gun to his early-teen sons, Ahmed and Yussef, about whose characters Pop seems clueless. Yussef, a pervert, watches his sister bathe naked and she (another pervert) likes it. We're invited to be perves too and view Yussef's masturbation. (Who decided we had to know that about the brat?) This Yussef, he picks up a Winchester bolt-action hunting rifle and hits what he aims at on his first shot. Pop tells his boys, in rough translation, "Take that rifle, herd them goats, and shoot jackals." Why do we believe a father would behave thus? Well, not all of us do. But the believers believe because this is the Third World, where thousands of years of hard living haven't taught folks a damn thing. As for Yussef, well, you *really* never know about Third World Islamic males. Born terrorists, right? Instead of jackals Yussef shoots at a bus. Perverse Yus never considers that there are people on just about any moving bus. Well, what Third World kid would? By the time Yus plugs his bus I'm laughing. Haven't I happened upon a brilliant satire exploring and exploiting the prejudices of the affluent West? Well, haven't I?

The bus is packed with affluent Westerners like lily-white Susan From San Diego, whom we meet in a reeking-of-poverty village. Susan's first line is to a waiter: "What do you have here that doesn't have fat in it?" So white girls are stupid too, but about different stuff. Then Susan asks her husband the one bright question in this picture: "Richard, why did we come here?" She's punished for that swiftly. She's the gal in the bus who gets shot by Yus. Since in this movie there is no such thing as an adult who keeps his or her head, there ensues much anguished confusion among many bedeviled people in several languages. (As in Babel, get it? Come on, really, do you get it? These picture-makers really want you to get it. It is the one thing about which they aren't

bullshitting.) In fairness, one old woman makes one apt move: she gives hysterical bleeding Susan a couple of tokes on a hashish pipe. Susan falls right to sleep, where she belongs.

After more fun than I've space to relate, a Moroccan cop drives to the village where Susan bleeds and Richard bleats. The cop tells Richard there will be no ambulance. Richard "Fuck you's" profusely while neither he nor the cop notice that now they don't need an ambulance 'cause the cop's car is equipped with, behold, a back seat. Why don't they transport Susan to the hospital in the vehicle that's *right there!*? It never occurs to them. These people just aren't as smart as us. *That's* what's wrong with the world! Folks not as smart as us gum shit up.

Here's something I learned back in Fault-Line City: When there's no one in the movie who's half as smart as the director thinks he is, nor half as smart as the audience thinks it is, something's fishy. The filmmakers are wallowing, and inviting the audience to wallow, in their innate superiority. In the darkened theater, and to the consternation of total strangers, I can't stop laughing. Hey, I like feeling superior as well as the next writer. What better way than guffaws to demonstrate my superiority to nearby total strangers?

Back in San Diego, Richard and Susan's housekeeper Amelia is at her wit's end. Her son Lucio is getting married in Mexico but Richard calls and tells her to skip her own son's wedding and mind his two angelic little ones. (That's a little much even for a rich white guy). We will learn that Yus-shot-the-bus is headlining every newscast (TERRORISM IN MORROCO!), so you'd think the friends and families of the Richard-Susans would flock to their home unbidden to tend their kids. Isn't that what you'd do if your people were stranded and bleeding in Morocco? But in this picture nobody's as smart or nice as you. So Amelia's stuck. She takes these angelic white children to Mexico for the wedding. Everybody parties. In the wee hours Amelia and her white angels get set to drive with drunken Santiago back to the San Diego. Would you let your undocumented mother drive with a drunk at god-knows-what-in-the-morning to brave the Border Patrol with two suspiciously white angels asleep in the back seat? Of course not. But Lucio does. He doesn't love his mother as much as we love ours.

As for Santiago, according to this comedy nobody's stupider than a drunken working-class Mexican. At the border he out-stupids everyone in the picture. In the car chase that ensues, the cops are not a quarter mile behind him; yet Santiago has time to stop the car, push Amelia and the kids out, and escape, while the cops hot on his tail don't notice. So Amelia and those two lily-white angels are lost on foot in the desert. I am not in the habit of laughing at lost children (anyway, not out loud), and some children need to get lost, the better to find the unexpected. But these baffled little whiners make you long for that monster Yussef, a kid with grit if ever there was one. Oh, don't worry. All the affluent make it through this picture intact, all the poor people get screwed. Every comedy needs a little realism.

I've no space to explain how the deaf-mute horny teen Tokyo girl fits into this story, but take my word for it: she fits. This kid's got grit. She flushes her panties down a toilet and flashes her pussy at giggly boys in public places. In one day she makes passes at a silly boy, a dentist, another silly boy, and a cop. She's rejected every time. I'm a stickler for some conventions but by the time she disrobes for the cop you can't help but wish she'd get some action. No dice. Then Daddy comes home. (He started this whole mess; he gave the rifle to the guy who sold it for a goat to Yus's pop.) Daddy sees daughter naked on the balcony, forty stories above Tokyo. He goes to her. She takes his hand. They embrace. That's the last laugh of this comedy: Middle-aged daddy, naked hot daughter, embracing on a balcony far above the chaos of Tokyo. Oh, I don't know... if that's the emblem of the peace that passeth understanding, I'd sooner not understand... but that is, no kidding, how this comedy ends, and fade to black, and then the director dedicates the picture to his daughter... no, I ain't going there. Not there. Not ever.

Babel won awards at Cannes, and not for Best Comedy. It seems I'm fated to laugh alone. Oh well. Old souls get used to that.

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