

Mar. 25, 1991

Price \$1.75

THE NEW YORKER



Bewert

THE CURRENT CINEMA

Realness

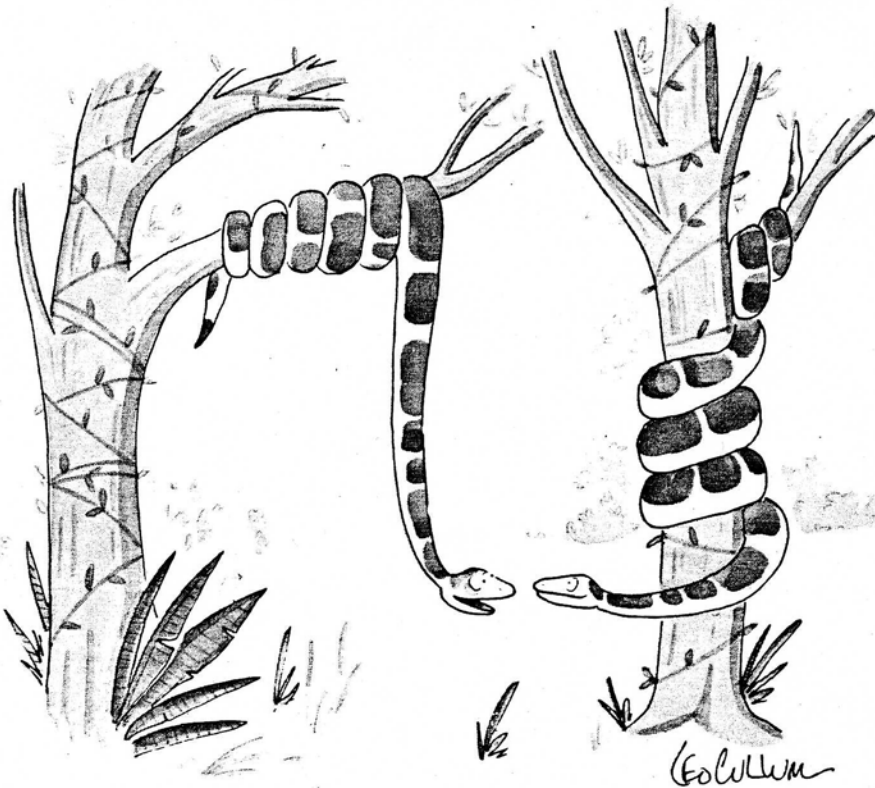
JENNIE LIVINGSTON'S "Paris Is Burning," about gay black and Latino men who compete in drag balls, is a beautiful piece of documentary filmmaking—lively, intelligent, exploratory. The movie is an examination of the rituals of an American urban subculture (most of the balls we're shown take place in Harlem), and the subject is loaded with ironies of the sort that encourage heavy-duty sociological analysis, because virtually every aspect of this community of underdogs imitates some perceived value of the white middle-class heterosexual society from which they feel excluded. The drag queens of "Paris Is Burning" seem to be holding a mirror up to the world of the empowered as they see it in movies, TV shows, and magazines. In the ballroom (usually an Elks lodge or a Y.M.C.A. hall), they appear in clothing that signifies strength, success, sexual desirability—in the armor of confident, unambiguous social identities. Some present themselves as elegant, glamorous women in designer outfits, and walk with the hip-swinging slouch of runway models, while others adopt more mundane personas:

college students (of both sexes), wearing glasses, cardigan sweaters, and serious looks, and carrying textbooks and notebooks at their sides; military men in crisp uniforms; aristocrats at play, dressed for yachting or riding to hounds; Wall Street businessmen in impeccable three-piece suits. The criterion by which all these turns on the floor are evaluated (in the style of the Olympics or a slam-dunk contest, with a panel of judges holding up scorecards after each performance) is verisimilitude—"realness," in the idiom of the ball culture. Every man we meet in this picture is the product of a tireless, fanatically scrupulous art practiced on himself—each man his own Pygmalion and his own Galatea.

It doesn't take an advanced degree to recognize the paradoxes of the world described by "Paris Is Burning," or to develop from it elaborate theories about reality and artifice, or the language of style, or the relationship of street culture to official culture, or the mechanics by which the dominant values of a society are internalized even by those whom they oppress—you could go on and on. The material is almost too rich,

too suggestive. Everything about "Paris Is Burning" signifies so blatantly and so promiscuously that our formulations—our neatly paired theses and antitheses—multiply faster than we can keep track of them, and the movie induces a kind of semiotic daze. What's wonderful about the picture is that Livingston is smart enough not to reduce her subjects to the sum of their possible meanings, perhaps because she realizes that the way the drag performers manipulate images and fetishes and the iconography of popular culture is for many of them a sophisticated form of humor: a joke whose punch line, I suspect, is the intellectual vertigo it produces in outsiders who presume to explain it. The most self-aware of the gay men we see here revel in the ironies of their social and sexual identities, and the film makes us appreciate the comic grace and the strange wisdom of that approach; the ball veterans, the elders of the community, use their self-conscious theatricality to create a refuge for themselves—a forest of symbols in which they and their friends can play undisturbed and others just get lost.

Some of those inside the ball world get lost, too—the ones who are taken in by their own mimetic powers, for whom "realness" is no joke. In the process of reporting on this extraordinary society and presenting for our entertainment the rowdy and often hilarious theatre of the ballroom competitions, "Paris Is Burning" (which is also the name of one of the major balls) manages to tell a fascinating story about generational differences. Part of the attraction of the ball subculture, what gives it its vitality as a community, is that its members have developed their own forms of social organization: everyone belongs to a particular "house," which functions as a kind of family. And within each house there's a structure, a hierarchy: the younger members are known as "the children"; the more experienced, who have won trophies at the balls, are "legends"; the ultimate authorities, watching over everyone, are "the mother" and "the father." As in any clan, the elders are the voices of prudence and moderation, but in this world it takes us a while to catch on to that, because the legends and the mothers and the fathers express their essential conservatism through flamboyance—old-style flaming effeminacy. They're men who came bursting out of the closet years ago, dressed to



"Am I still your main squeeze?"

the teeth and ready to dazzle. The first performer we see in full drag in "Paris Is Burning" is Pepper Labeija, who appears on the ballroom floor in an extravagant, billowing gold dress and struts his stuff with outrageous, self-mocking assurance. Livingston cuts from this out-there performance to a scene of Pepper at home—a trim middle-aged man in men's clothes. He looks straight into the camera and says, "Do you want me to say who I am and all of that?" His voice as he says this has an exaggerated weariness and an undertone of sarcasm: he seems amused both by the absurdity of the idea that he could define himself simply and by the naïveté of a filmmaker—or an audience—who thinks he'd give himself away so easily. He answers with the equivalent of name, rank, and serial number: "I am Pepper Labeija, the Legendary Mother of the House of Labeija." Pepper is the presiding spirit of "Paris Is Burning." His campy bravura in the ballroom and his ironic detachment outside it are the components of a remarkably sane, clear-eyed attitude toward life. He enjoys himself, because he appreciates the value of play and make-believe and knows them for what they are. His routines on the ballroom floor are explicitly and unabashedly *performances*, as obvious and outsized as those of an old Shakespearean ham; he has the wit to keep his distance from what he impersonates.

Later in the film, Pepper speaks directly to the heart of the issue: "I've been a man, and I've been a man who emulated a woman. I've never been a woman." He's making this statement as a warning to the younger generation, to the children who seem to him to be taking verisimilitude to dangerous extremes. Many of the young ballwalkers we see in "Paris Is Burning" perform in a far more earnest and more naturalistic style than that of the legends, and with an almost frightening absorption in their roles; they're Method actors of drag. A few have had breast implants; a handful have gone all the way and had sex-change operations; and many more dream of such transformations. They dream, too, of breaking out of the safe, self-contained world of the ball subculture and gaining acceptance in the larger world—

not as talented drag performers but as real women. We see one of them, an elegant young man who calls himself Octavia (of the House of Saint Laurent), nervously entering the Supermodel of the Year competition; his idol is the cover girl Paulina. Another, a slim blond ("petite" is his word) who goes by the name of Venus Xtravaganza, says flatly, "I would like to be a spoiled rich white girl." In a brilliant sequence, Livingston cuts back and forth between an interview with



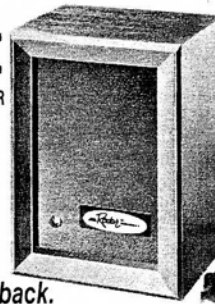
Octavia and one with Venus, each in his shabby-looking apartment, and their comments have the eerie repetitiveness of a litany: almost every sentence either of them utters begins with "I want." They're intensely focussed on their fantasies, which have become their goals: they've crossed a line between the attempt to create an illusion and the belief that they can incarnate it in the world. These children don't think of what they do at the balls as play; they lack the humor and the self-awareness of the drag classicism that the legends practice—the protective irony that has enabled men like Pepper to survive in a hostile world.

Livingston and her editor, Jonathan Oppenheim, are errifically deft at juxtaposing the near-hysterical party atmosphere of the ball footage with the more reflective mood of the interviews, and they don't hit us over the head with the contrast between the wild fun and the pathos: both qualities seem to emerge naturally from the material. And, like all the best documentaries, "Paris Is Burning" does its subjects the honor of not understanding them too readily—of allowing them to retain some of their mystery. The movie is a sympathetic observation of a specialized, private world; it doesn't feel like a violation or an intrusion (or, for that matter, a dissertation). We feel, instead, Livingston's curiosity about the way this little society works and her affection for its members. She's more interested in the differences between individuals than in the theoretical similarities, so she keeps picking up fresh nuances of behavior and performance: the movie packs a tremendous amount of information into its seventy-eight minutes. "Paris Is Burning" has its share of sobering, and even tragic,

RODAR® II

ULTRASONIC SUPERPOWER

GETS RID OF RATS, MICE, BATS, FLEAS, SQUIRRELS...



...or your money back.

RODAR II is the super powerful professional ultrasonic pest repeller based on more than ten years of engineering and field testing. Its super transducer blasts out ultrasound (at 23 to 55 kHz) with up to 60 and more times the power of other ultrasonic devices (that make preposterous claims). And power is what makes the difference - both in size of area covered and how effective it is in any size area. You need all the power you can get, within safe limits, and RODAR II is completely safe.

RODAR ULTRASOUND, as loud as a jackhammer - unbearable to pests, but inaudible to humans and pets - drives pests out and, better yet, keeps them from getting in. Use RODAR II wherever pests exist or are a threat - home, office, vacation home, farm, restaurant, storage area, kitchen, attic... Protects up to 3000 sq. ft.

ROACHES, OTHER PESTS... RODAR II users report remarkable results. Our 90-day money-back trial shows you how well RODAR II works, at no risk.

Handsome simulated walnut 5 1/4" high, 2 lbs. Uses less than 5 watts. Plugs into standard 110v. outlet. A Monadnock product manufactured by Micron Corporation in the U.S.A. Immediate shipment.

90-DAY MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE. 12-MONTH WARRANTY

SPECIAL LOW PRICE...send \$89.95 plus \$4.00 for shipping and handling (in Mass. add 5% tax) by check, money-order, MasterCard or Visa number and expiration date, to MICRON SALES COMPANY, Dept. 722, 170 Kerry Place, Norwood, MA 02062, or CALL TOLL FREE (anytime) 1-800-334-0854 Extension 651. (For information call 617-326-8675.) ASK FOR PRODUCT NUMBER 722.





**BACK-SAVER
WEEDR**

**THE Stand-Up,
Selective Weeder
That Works!**

Squeeze, step, pull...out comes the weed, root and all. No back-bending, no chemicals, no big hole in lawn. Neat and safe. Gardener tested and guaranteed.

Order direct, \$39.95 postpaid
1-800-633-8772 or write for catalog of
BACK-SAVER tools Rugg Mfg. Co.,
105 Newton St, Greenfield, MA 01301



MAPS OF BRITAIN

Ordnance maps for travel or genealogy, to enhance history or literature. Send for our unique catalog. Telephone (206) 485-2132

David Morgan
11812 Northcreek Pky. N., Suite 103
Bothell, WA 98011

**GOOD
USED
BOOKS**

Since 1948, thousands of libraries and individuals have been buying regularly; you can too! Send two dollars for 20,000 typical titles and prices classified in over eighty subjects.

**EDITIONS DESK Y,
BOICEVILLE, N.Y. 12412**

GET AWAY THE WYNDHAM WAY.

Nestled between Georgetown and the White House, right on Pennsylvania Avenue, lies the Wyndham Bristol Hotel. A place where you may relax on weekends

but we won't.

For reservations, call us at 202-955-6400 or 1-800-822-4200.

Or call your travel agent. Then come stay the weekend and let us show you The Wyndham Way.

\$89
Per room, per night,
not per person.



WYNDHAM BRISTOL HOTEL

THE RIGHT WAY. THE WYNDHAM WAY.

2430 Pennsylvania Ave., NW
Washington, D.C. 20037 202-955-6400

Rate good Friday, Saturday & Sunday nights.
Not applicable to conventions or groups.
Ask about our Winter Weekend Packages.



Secrets Of Santa Fe

Rancho Encantado

Santa Fe's premier ranch/resort holds your key to Santa Fe's secrets. Experience the romance of the high mountain desert at Rancho Encantado. Send for your free copy of John Egan's *Secrets of Santa Fe* and be prepared for your next visit to the Land of Enchantment.

Rancho Encantado
Rt. 4, Box 57c
Santa Fe, New Mexico 87501
(505) 982-3537 Ext. 555
(505) 983-8269 FAX

HOT SAUCE!

At last, a convenient source for the best and hardest-to-find hot sauces, BBQs, chutneys, mustards, marinades, and much more. Satisfaction guaranteed. Call or write for our free catalog.

Spectacular Sauces, Inc. 1-800-999-4949
P.O. Box 30010, Dept. NY-325
Alexandria, VA 22310



NATHAN'S
Fine Food & Spirits
3150 M Street, N.W., Georgetown
Washington, D.C. 20007
(202) 338-2000

moments, but its spirit is buoyant, because it never strays too far from the crazy exuberance of the ballrooms. We see one amazing performance after another, from the spectacular lightning-flash voguing of Willi Ninja (he's like Nijinsky's faun on fast forward) to the picture's final routine, a lip-synching turn by a fat man doing Patti LaBelle in a sequinned gown: this huge queen wiggles his hips and waves his arms and then, suddenly, breaks into a dead run for the center of the floor, where he flops down and begins to writhe ecstatically, kicking his big legs every which way. There's no accounting for this sort of theatrical transport. It is, perhaps, a joy that only the most abandoned of performers will ever know, and all we can do is gaze on it, in delight and awe; its sources are beyond the reach of our formulations.

THE Italian courtroom drama "Open Doors" is adapted from a novella by Leonardo Sciascia, whose most celebrated stories are perverse, satiric fables about crime and punishment in his native Sicily. In the movie, directed by Gianni Amelio, there are traces of Sciascia's sinister wit, but they don't always stand out clearly from the rather placid surface. Both the novella and the film are based on an actual criminal case—the 1937 trial, in Palermo, of a Fascist bureaucrat accused of murdering his wife and two of his colleagues. The killer (played by Ennio Fantastichini) freely admits his guilt, and knows that the punishment mandated by Mussolini's government—which he has served enthusiastically—is death. Everyone, including the defendant, expects the trial to be a purely formal exercise, with an inevitable conclusion: the fatal sentence will be pronounced, and the power of Fascist justice will be affirmed. But the proceedings don't follow the ordained course: one of the judges, Vito Di Francesco (Gian Maria Volonte), keeps fouling up the works by calling new witnesses and conducting lengthy, irrelevant-seeming interrogations of them. At first, we don't know what Di Francesco is doing, and can't tell whether he does, either; we even suspect that this laconic white-haired man might be a little feeble-minded. Gradually, it dawns on us that his detours and ditherings are in fact strategic. He doesn't believe that a capital-punishment case should be conducted briskly,

perfunctorily: he wants to slow things down, to give his fellow-judges and the jurors time to consider the gravity of their responsibility—and perhaps to reconsider their authority to pronounce a sentence of death. The stubborn judge forces the trial, and the movie, to adopt his rhythms, which are those of contemplation and patient deliberation.

What Sciascia probably found irresistible about this material was the irony inherent in Di Francesco's strategy: here is a man who is using his judicial powers in order to delay, or possibly avoid, exercising a judicial power he finds terrifying. Amelio doesn't seem to share Sciascia's mordant sense of humor; he treats the story, for the most part, as a conventional docudrama with an anti-capital-punishment message. The movie isn't bad at all—it just goes flat every now and then. (And it wouldn't necessarily be more effective if it reflected Sciascia's sensibility more faithfully; the central irony here is too thin to sustain our interest through an entire movie.) Volonte, however, is a wonder. Not much of this astonishing actor's work has reached American screens in the past twelve years—since the crowning achievement of his performance as Carlo Levi in Francesco Rosi's "Christ Stopped at Eboli." He looks slither now—almost frail—but he's still a forceful presence: even when he seems to be doing nothing, you can't take your eyes off him. The role of Judge Di Francesco isn't a flashy one; it's all stillness and reserve and long, thoughtful walks. The drama—the conflict—is internal; everything of any importance in this picture happens inside the judge's mind, and he doesn't always tell us what he's thinking. Volonte, with his eyes and his bearing and the way he wears his clothes, inhabits his character so fully that we feel we can read his thoughts even when he's not so sure of them himself. And his movements have a lyrical precision: they often evoke the images of aging we find in the radiant late poems of Yeats. (Volonte knows how to look like "a tattered coat upon a stick" without appearing pathetic.) The actor draws us into a kind of complicity with the judge, and, transforming himself, seems to transform the movie: he gives it the suggestion of real human mystery beneath the flat surface—a constant sense of something about to be revealed.

—TERRENCE RAFFERTY