

Film

FILM VIEW
VINCENT CANBY

Performers Who Made Their Mark During 1984

Whether or not you believe that 1984 was the Year of the Dog in movies, it was noteworthy as a year of a rather large number of impressive performances by new — or, at least, comparatively new — actors and actresses.

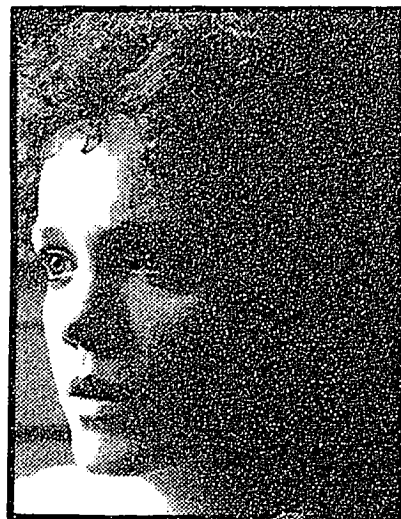
F. Murray Abraham, who makes his starring-role debut as Sallieri in "Amadeus," is expected to be a cinch to win an Oscar nomination for that performance and, according to some knowledgeable Hollywood residents, he has a very good chance of winning the top award. For years, John Malkovich has been a force on the Chicago stage as one of the original members of the Steppenwolf Theater. In 1984, after starring in the Off Broadway hit production of Sam Shepard's "True West," he not only directed the acclaimed Off Broadway revival of Lanford Wilson's "Balm in Gilead," but made his film debut with two stunning performances — in "Places in the Heart" and "The Killing Fields."

The following is a list of 14 performers who, on the basis of their work in last year's films, seem to be sure things, if not for stardom then at least for continuing careers on the screen. One possibly significant note: of these 14 performers, only four are women, which is doubly peculiar because otherwise, this was a year in which actresses — established actresses — were demonstrating their power.

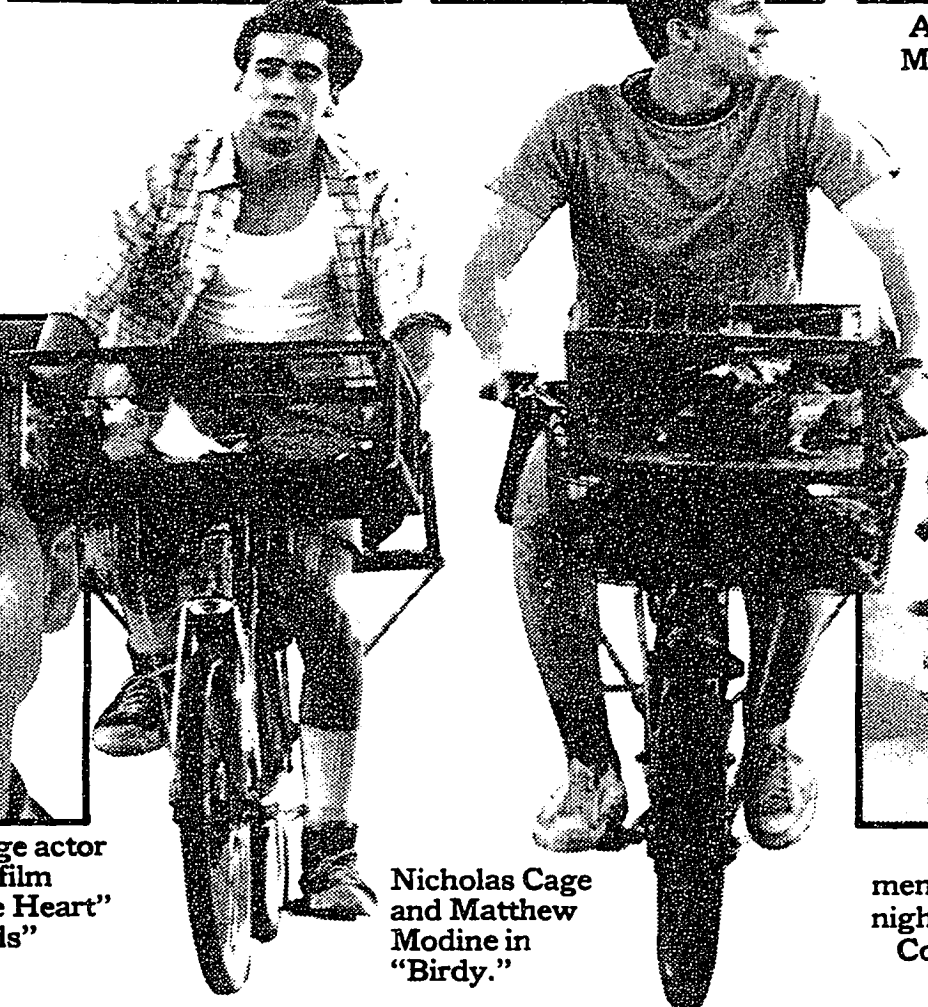
Diane Keaton starred in two films, "The Little Drummer Girl" and "Mrs. Soffel," Sally Field in "Places in the



John Malkovich, a stage actor who made a stunning film debut in "Places in the Heart" and "The Killing Fields"



Above, from left to right, Mandy Patinkin in "The Bostonians," Michael Keaton in "Johnny Dangerously" and Christine Lahti in "Swing Shift" — lasting impressions



Nicholas Cage and Matthew Modine in "Birdy."



Gregory Hines was memorable as an ambitious nightclub dancer in Francis Coppola's "Cotton Club."

Heart," Sissy Spacek in "The River," Jessica Lange in "Country" and Goldie Hawn in "Swing Shift" and "Protocol." Miss Lange and Miss Hawn also have become their own producers. Still, could it be that in spite of Jane Fonda and Barbra Streisand, who early on showed other actresses how to take control of their own careers, Hollywood remains very much a man's world?

The 14 performers who made their marks in 1984 are, in alphabetical order:

F. Murray Abraham. Mr. Abraham, born in El Paso of Italian and Syrian parents, has been in and around the

New York theater for years and also has played smallish roles in a number of films, including "The Ritz," in which he recreated the role he played in the New York stage production, "Serpico" and "All the President's Men." His first major break came as Omar, a hood in Brian De Palma's "Scarface," but nothing he had done earlier was preparation for his haunted, hair-raising performance as the obsessed Sallieri in Milos Forman's screen version of Peter Shaffer's hit play. It's a great role, and casting a non-star as Sallieri was a calculated risk that now, in retrospect, pays off. Mr. Abraham brings no associations with overblown, earlier performances to distract

"A number of new performers seem to be sure things, if not for stardom then at least for continuing careers." (Vincent Canby)

from the character he creates here, which is as rich as it is original.

Victor Banerjee. In the past, there haven't been that many roles for Indian actors in Hollywood, so it may be some time before we again see the talented Mr. Banerjee, who gives a remarkably complex performance as Dr. Aziz in David Lean's big, old-fashioned narrative hit, "A Passage to India." In India, Mr. Banerjee is a star, having made his film debut in 1977 in a small role in "The Chess Players," by Satyajit Ray, for whom he starred in 1983 in "The Home and the World." As Aziz, the pivotal role in Mr. Lean's adaptation of the E. M. Forster novel, Mr. Banerjee manages to communicate simultaneously a curious combination of emotions, including arrogance, timidity, fawning approval, fury, simplicity and utter calm. He's a comic character forever teetering on the edge of tragedy, and it's one of the best performances of the season.

Nicolas Cage. Having made his screen debut in 1983 as about the only memorable character in the otherwise forgettable "Valley Girl," Mr. Cage went on to survive "Rumble Fish" and then to turn in three excellent performances in 1984 — as Sean Penn's worldly best friend in "Racing with the Moon," as Richard Gere's possibly psychotic hood-brother in "Cotton Club" and especially as the maimed war veteran in "Birdy," the title character's childhood pal who attempts to bring the catatonic Birdy back to the not-so-wonderful world of reality. Mr. Cage's angular features are so malleable that no two characters he has played so far ever look exactly alike. He could be at the beginning of a major career, both as a leading man and a leading man-character actor.

Daryl Hannah. Miss Hannah, one of the more astonishing special effects in Ridley Scott's "Blade Runner," began 1984 in "Reckless" with a rather conventionally pouty performance as a beautiful, very blond high-school girl whose tongue is tied but whose body yearns for love and freedom. There is, however, considerably more to her — physically and mentally — as she demonstrates in Ron Howard's very popular mermaid comedy, "Splash." Where Miss Hannah goes from "Splash," is anyone's guess, but if she can find material to match the essential visual splendor she registers on the screen, she may become one of tomorrow's stars.

Gregory Hines. You may or may not remember Mr. Hines in "Wolfen," "Deal of the Century" or "The Muppets Takes Manhattan," in which only Joan Rivers was able to hold her own with Miss Piggy. However, he and veteran English character actor Bob Hoskins are the most riveting things in "Cotton Club," Francis Ford Coppola's troubled, all-singing, all-dancing, sometimes all-bland period melodrama. Mr. Hines has a rare screen presence. He doesn't sneak up on you. He's so laid back, so self-assured and so graceful, whether acting as an ambitious hooper or tap-dancer, alone or in tandem with his brother Maurice, that he forces YOU to sneak up on HIM. The vitality and comic intelligence that have made him a New York stage favorite in "Eubie" and "Sophisticated Ladies" translate easily to the screen.

Zeljko Ivanek. Having won awards for his performance in Off Broadway's "Cloud 9," having created the role of Haly under Athol Fugard's direction of the playwright's "Master Harold and the Boys" at Yale, and then having had the task of playing the somewhat colorless older brother to Matthew Broderick's vivid Eugene in Neil Simon's "Brighton Beach Memoirs," Mr. Ivanek has

Continued on Page 20

This American Mastered British Humor

By NORA SAYRE

Evelyn Waugh was partial to the word *fummox*, meaning to confuse or bewilder; the verb befits the action in the British comedy of the late 1940's and early 50's, where authority figures were confounded and then manipulated by those whom they sought to control. The impotence of authority was a persistent theme in the post-war satires made at Ealing Studios, some of which can be seen at the Museum of Modern Art until Feb. 5. (The series, which surveys the career of producer Michael Balcon, also includes a number of Ealing's straight dramatic films.) Emerging from the sense of oppression imposed by wartime austerity, rationing, and the disciplines necessary to winning a war, British audiences welcomed Ealing's small ballads of rebellion, and many were extremely popular here. While critics and historians frequently referred to the "anarchy" that permeates such movies as "Passport to Pimlico" and "The Lavender Hill Mob," the films are hardly insurrectionary; instead, they convey the delights of challenging the

Nora Sayre, a former film critic of The New York Times is the author of "Running Time: Films of the Cold War" and "Sixties Going on Seventies."

boss and out-foxing his functionaries.

Some of the wittiest and most inventive Ealing comedies were directed by Alexander Mackendrick, who was born in Boston of Scottish parents, educated in Glasgow and has worked on both sides of the Atlantic. Often praised for his evocations of the British character — a major concern of Michael Balcon's — he also directed that most pungent of Broadway movies, "Sweet Smell of Success." Two of his classics were "The Man in the White Suit" and "The Ladykillers." "Whisky Galore!" (also known as "Tight Little Island" 1949), which is playing today and on Jan. 8, was the first feature film directed by Mr. Mackendrick. The movie focuses on a ship with a cargo of whisky that was wrecked near an island in the Outer Hebrides in 1943, when rationing had deprived the islanders of all spirits. Pitting their intelligence against a stumble-witted English captain (Basil Radford) who is determined to prevent the looting of the ship, the exuberant Scots foil the forces of the law.

In this tiny community, where each inhabitant knows his neighbor's business and the one telephone operator recognizes everyone's voice, the lawgiver is helpless against the native talents for collaboration: we see shots of hands rapidly hiding bottles of whisky in drawers, stoves, a cash register, beneath a baby in a basket, in roof gutters and rain barrels.



Alexander Mackendrick—comedies of rebellion

Much of the charm of the adult delinquents springs from the swiftness of their thinking: if one scheme collapses, another instantly replaces it. The texture of the movie heightens its hilarity: the documentary narration and the glimpses of stoic figures in black backed by cumulus clouds, or closeups of somber, craggy faces,

parody the visual mannerisms of Robert Flaherty's "Man of Aran."

Some of the other Ealing comedies were criticized in Britain for quaintness and coziness. But the charges can't be leveled against Mr. Mackendrick's work, which contains darker vibrations than many of the Ealing romps. In "The Man in the White Suit" (1951), to be shown on Jan. 13 and 18, Alec Guinness plays a youthful genius who invents an indestructible fiber; the textile executives are horrified by the prospect of a product that will ruin their entire industry, and the factory workers face the elimination of their jobs. The naive scientist, obsessed only with perfecting his creation, ignores all its consequences while the businessmen and laborers unite in conspiring to suppress it.

Consternation is a specialty of Mr. Mackendrick: again, impulsive plotting and desperate remedies are essential to his comedies. Lines like "This is insanity!" echo through board rooms where the voices of gentlemen are not supposed to rise. Panic ensues when test tubes gurgle mysteriously or when someone escapes from a locked room, and dignity is abandoned by those whose essence is composure.

Now 72, and a fellow of the school of film at the California Institute of the Arts, where he teaches, Mr. Mackendrick recently shared some of his memories of Ealing. The director explained an interior joke of "The Man in the White Suit": all the main personae in the film were caricatures of the staff at Ealing. The high-strung industrialist was Michael Balcon; Cecil Parker played him with the propriety of a controlled hysteric. (The scriptwriters worried that he might recognize some of his own phrases, but he didn't.) The ancient asthmatic executive (Ernest Thesiger) was inspired by the musical director of the studio; the shop steward who sedated the scientist was actually the nurse at Ealing. Alec Guinness drew on "the impervious innocence" of the very young publicity photographer of the unit: the actor watched the effect that he had on his colleagues.

Mr. Mackendrick remarked that Mr. Guinness has long been "a fantastic observer of others," paying acute attention to their voices, and that "he has the habit" of employing "the idiosyncrasies of people he knows." (In Mr. Mackendrick's "The Ladykillers" a prototype was the critic Kenneth Tynan, whose style of smoking, long scarf, protruding

History Relived



A mock execution is staged by a group of youths in "The Inheritors," a drama about the neo-Nazi movement. Written, produced and directed by Walter Bannert, the film opens Friday at Cinema Studio One.

teeth, and wispy hair enhanced the portrait of a caustic criminal — which was also influenced by the director's life-long fascination with Fritz Lang's "Dr. Mabuse.") Still, the Guinness approach was far from literal; Mr. Mackendrick said that the personal details provided "early starting points for a developing characterization that soon shed its origins."

Today, "The Man in the White Suit" still seems to be one of Mr. Guinness's richest roles. As the scientist, he ranges from passive timidity to total recklessness; the manner is modest — when he's not utterly arrogant. When the businessmen try to bribe him, Mr. Guinness's sublime impassivity distills the power that this man has over others — simply because he doesn't care about money; he can make them lose millions because personal wealth has no attraction for him. (Since capitalism is satirized, some left-wing members of the studio thought they saw certain Marxist patterns in the movie, but radicals are mocked as well. Mr. Mackendrick, who has "no political commitment," volunteered that he "delights in political irony.")

Mr. Mackendrick stressed that the scientist — who's blind to all human feeling — wasn't meant to be a sympathetic person; however, Mr. Guinness

gave him a dimension that made spectators identify with him. Pondering his interest in "destructive innocents" — which had not been a conscious theme in his work — the director acknowledged that such beings have recurred in almost all of his movies, from the blundering English captain in "Whisky Galore!" to the children in "High Wind in Jamaica" and the small boy in "Sammy Going South." As these characters remain absorbed in their own pursuits, disaster for others follows in their wake: they resemble bad drivers who never have accidents — while other cars collide and crash behind them. But they're completely unaware of the havoc they create, and their placidity is a key to comedy.

Yet the innocents can eventually suffer, as the captain does when his plans to rescue the whisky backfire, as the scientist does when his miraculous fabric disintegrates. In each case, they must endure the enormous laughter of others. Laughter at defeat is central to both movies. Reflecting that analyses of comedy are usually attempted by those who have no sense of humor, Mr. Mackendrick said, "There's a moment toward the end of certain kinds of comedies when they ought to get a little nasty." Paraphrasing Max Eastman's "Enjoy-Continued on Page 20



Alec Guinness, Katie Johnson, Peter Sellers and Danny Green in "The Ladykillers," to be shown at the Museum of Modern Art on Jan. 25 and 26.

National Film Archive, British Film Institute