

He Who Laughs

By Gerard Raymond

PARIS—"Sadomasochism makes me laugh," says Roman Polanski about his current film, *Bitter Moon*. Does that sound like the director of *Repulsion*, the man whose name many permanently associate with the kinky and the bizarre?

He looks younger than his 60 years, and he bears those same features that so effectively conveyed the creepy menace of the goon who slashed Jack Nichol-

son's nose in *Chinatown*, the last film he directed in America. Nevertheless, I can't help thinking how *ordinary* the slightly built man with the impish smile in front of me seems, but then appearances are often deceptive as far as the Paris-born Polish director is concerned. This man has a special talent for taking the most ordinary of scenes and giving it a twist that completely disorients the viewer

Bitter Moon charts the impassioned relationship of Oscar and Mimi, a failed American novelist

and his young French wife, as it progresses from benign obsession to conventional lovemaking to sadomasochism into cruelty and then to a marriage bound by pure hatred. The story unfolds in a series of old-fashioned flashbacks, and is filtered through the second-rate writer's ludicrously purple narration.

It's easy to place this erotically charged psychodrama in the body of work created by the same man who explored the terrors of pregnancy in *Rosemary's Baby* and



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depicted the mental breakdown of a sexually repressed woman in *Repulsion*.

"I simply cater to myself by making a film for my type of mind," says Polanski as he works his way through a plate of oysters. The anatomy of a love affair gone sour obviously piques his interest, but *Bitter Moon* is infused with a wicked sense of humor that sets up a certain distance between the viewer and the subject. When Oscar and Mimi go shopping for s/m accoutrements, Polanski shoots the scene in a highly exaggerated style. And the sight of them pretending to be barnyard animals does indeed make you laugh.

Humor is one way Polanski tackles what he calls the "dichoto-

my of love and sex." But is there a more complex game afoot? Mimi, Oscar's wife, is performed by none other than Polanski's wife, 27-year-old Emmanuelle Seigner. Initially an innocent and sexy Parisian waif, later a vamp straight out of a paranoid male fantasy, Mimi skirts dangerously cartoon and cliché. But the abuse she suffers and the hurt she subsequently inflicts are all too real.

Polanski cannot be unaware of how much his off-beat movies affect our perception of him. Could he be playing with our fantasies, if not his own? Working with Seigner in such an emotionally naked context made life off the set difficult for both of them: "You can imagine what is happening in-

side when you have to cry as much as she has to in this film; obviously the glands are going crazy, and you can't expect her to turn off the emotions when she comes home." But sharing the same interests and expectations made it worthwhile, he adds, speculating that many directors work with their lovers precisely for this reason.

Ultimately, I imagine, Polanski's movies hide as much as they reveal about the man. Our conversation, it becomes clear, will not shed a lot of light on the director's mysteries, either. But maybe there's a small clue in a film Polanski didn't make—a subject too Polanski the man to withstand the director's famous touch. Polanski mentions in passing that Spielberg once wanted him to direct *Schindler's List* because he had escaped from the very Krakow

ghetto featured in the film. He could never have made the film, he asserts, because, "it would have been too much of a documentary for me, I would have got entangled in it."

Lunch is over and Polanski heads off to the nearby Billancourt studios where he is rehearsing Sigourney Weaver and Ben Kingsley for his next film, a screen adaptation of Ariel Dorfman's play *Death and the Maiden*. Polanski now works in Paris, where he has lived ever since his brush with U.S. law for having sex with a 13-year-old in 1977. I ask him if he misses making movies in America. "I miss the efficiency of the [Hollywood] studios," he says. "I miss the big machine, I know how to operate it. It has a great inertia this machine, but if you know how to use it, you can do a lot of interesting things." ■