

Humphrey McQueen

Down Under Buñuel

ALTHOUGH NO GRANT WAS AVAILABLE from the Film and Television Board of the Australia Council, the government did lend considerable support by way of free principals and extras for the making of Luis Buñuel's latest film, *Qu'ils mangent de gâteau*.

While it follows many of Buñuel's favourite themes, this antipodean epic must be considered a distinct break from his earlier style since it was shot as one long action in Canberra on the evening of Friday, 26 March. The occasion was a private function sponsored by the Australia-British Association for the retiring British High Commissioner, Sir Maurice James. The location was the dining room of Bruce Hall at the Australian National University. Buñuel insisted on this site after a tour of other venues earlier in the week. Bruce Hall dining room is a cavernously vast emptiness, dominated by Leonard French's massive sequence depicting the 'Seven Days' of creation; the biblical theme of order out of chaos providing an obliquely contrapuntal motif to the film's principal intent. No less significantly, one wall of the dining room consists of glass, which meant that contact between the participants was possible without them being able to touch each other. The prospect entranced the surrealist old master immediately. Unlike Visconti, who declined to use any mass action in his later scenarios, Buñuel is still committed to the cathartic impact of strong openings and closes. Thus, violent confrontations between 120 shevelled and couth guests—defended by 100 police—and the 600 bejeaned and rangey demonstrators both begin and end the film.

Nothing is lost—and much gained—by recounting the story line in some detail.

CROWD ASSEMBLES, 600 strong, around the locked doors of Bruce Hall. Guests begin to arrive, pass through them. A Rolls Royce appears, followed by silver hair. Abuse. False alarm. It is the British High Commissioner. Then: 'British troops in Northern Ireland: Out Now'. Flashing lights, motor cycle outriders, police car escorts, larger and blacker car. More, and more silvery hair. 'Kerr out!'. 'Kerr serves the Yanks, the police serve Kerr!'. The only steps are blocked by protestors. Kerr is jostled and pushed. The police regroup to force a path. Students sit. Three minutes of stalemate. Police form a flying wedge and drive a passage through to a side door. 'Kerr out! Kerr serves the Yanks!'.

Doors are bolted and police form a shoulder-to-shoulder line along two sides of the building. Demonstrators move to the right of dining hall to face guests and Kerr (who invited himself) through a twenty-foot high and hundred-foot long glass wall. Pre-dinner drinks for twenty minutes bring guests and demonstrators closest. Outside, shouting, banging, thumping, trumpeting, raucous ribaldry. Inside, sedate slivers of mouthed attempts at slender conversation, little more than blinked smiles of disorientation. Outside, the rumbustious round of clamour and exhortation. Inside, a rising unease as a table, outside the plate glass, is raised and lowered onto another table. Are they just making more noise, or will it come hurtling through, splattering glass amongst the diamonds, blood over the rouge? Inside, the guests are moved, as if by revolving panels in the floor, away from the glass wall, until they are forced back against tables still being laid with green non-returnable carafes.

Meanwhile, Kerr moves through the other guests. Nods to Auchmuty, who has left his Battle of the Boyne ribbons at home. Smiles as Justice Fox suggests the police move in. Always a glass in his hand, always moving up and down to his mouth, as a variant on the regal wave. Over one hundred mature, sophisticated, intelligent human beings pretend that they are alone in the world, pretend that they can hear each other, pretend that the others have something to say. Like the extras that they are, they have the habit, so they will go through the motions. Yet, as the initial surprise wears off, and the alcohol begins to take effect, they relax, and recognise that nothing is different inside. The inability to hear what the others are saying is only marginal. It is always thus. No one really listens, they just wait their turn to open and shut their mouths.

Outside, the demonstrators break a window with a pole that carries one of the Eureka flags. New chants: 'Traitor-general, out now!'. Old favorites are rehearsed to perfection: 'Sieg Heil!'. In over an hour Kerr will leave. They have to keep shouting and banging for only an hour.

Inside, the lights are turned off and batteries of red tapers lit. Orange-frocted waitresses—rumoured Labor supporters—move around with the first course. Nobody looks at the glass wall from where the noise is still penetrating—more precisely through the broken pane. Inwardly, joy at not having to be witty, interesting or interested. A chance just to be oneself.

Outside, rumours of departure spread and spill over into disbelief as 9.30 passes and the main course has still not appeared. An historian takes the loudhailer to the broken window for his part as strolling player, to prick the conscience of the Kerr by reminding him of his crimes . . . A quiet, only occasionally naughty performance that interests men in plain suits. Now it is the poet's turn. He sings one of his own political folk songs, 'Gough and Johnny', ending 'The moral of this story/ is never trust a grouper/ for he'll do you in the end/ and he done us all wrong/ yes, he done us all wrong'. The crowd comes together, laughs, claps and joins in. It is smaller, but will hold. New chants are tried out: 'one, two, three,

four/ what's a dinner party for?/ five, six, seven, eight/ hit him with a dinner plate'.

Inside, speeches. Outside, more noise than ever from dustbin lids on sheets of iron. Finally, Kerr rises to propose a toast. So long has he sat that, outside, there are slurs on his sobriety. It is almost eleven. The police move into position, blocking off doors and passage ways: the demonstrators slip around the corner on to front verandahs and lawns. Inside, more speeches, extra port and cigars. Outside, a hand-ful keep up the noise at the glass wall by banging things together. Police vans turn two spotlights on the crowd: a beacon shining all over campus. Students rush to join the demonstration.

Numbers are back to 400 when Kerr at last appears. At the top of the steps, he falters. His wedge of police prop him up. Then he moves forward again, blowing kisses to the crowd. 'Traitor! traitor! traitor!'. Overblown kisses. Pushing, shoving, jostling, until the car is reached. Lady Kerr mounts the tumbrel, turns and haughts: 'Qu'ils mangent du gâteau'.*

Qu'ils mangent du gâteau will be repeated live in other capital cities as soon as the principals regain their equipoise. On Tuesday and Wednesday of the next week, Buñuel made a mammoth version of the Rocky Horror Show, tentatively entitled 'Les Etats-Unis, c'est moi'; armed cars and FBI groups being specially flown in for the shooting.

*Which is one up on Marie Antoinette, who probably uttered in German.

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