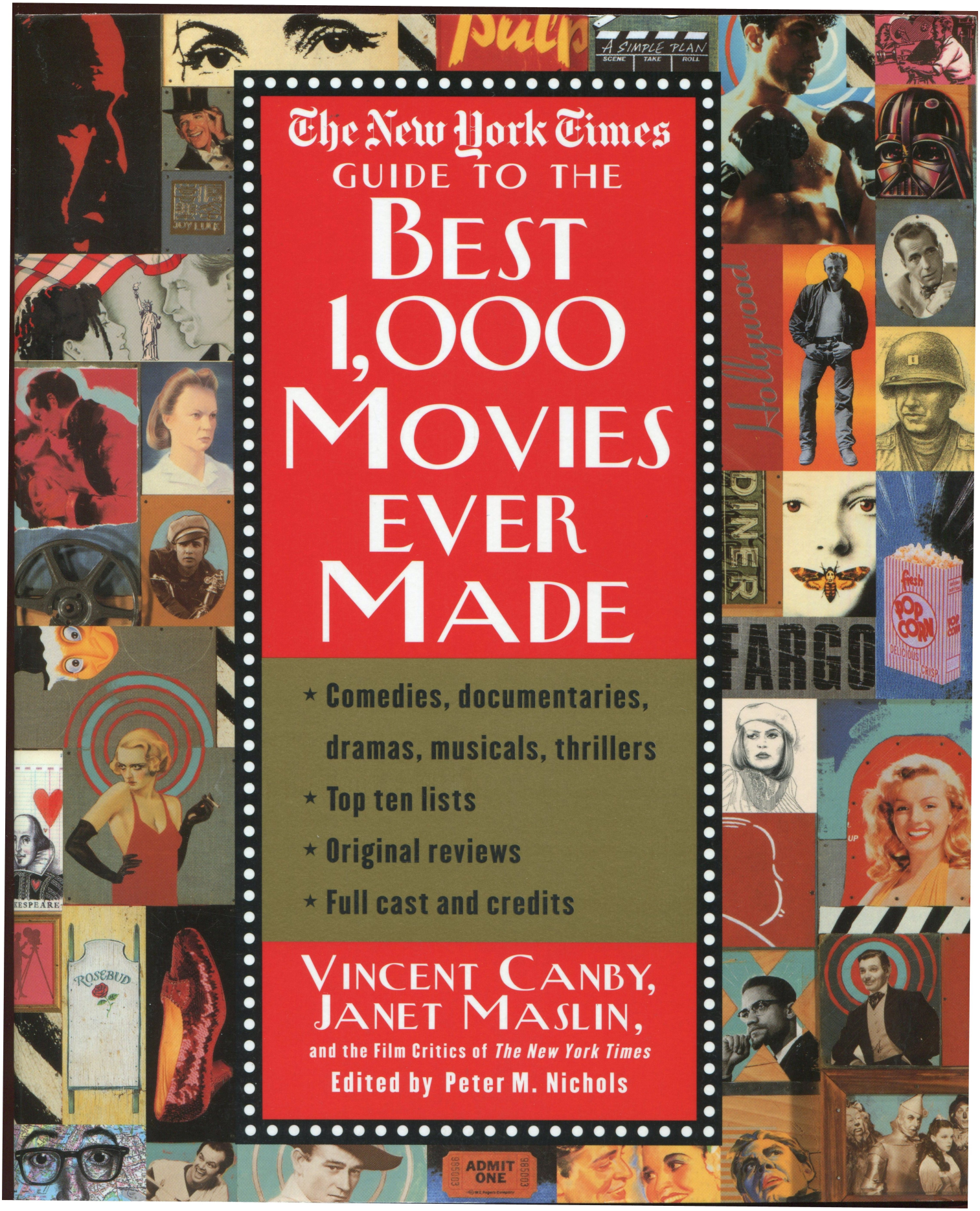

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VINCENT CANBY, JANET MASLIN,
and the Film Critics of *The New York Times*
Edited by Peter M. Nichols

owners away. They try severing their heads and so forth, but when the new owners shriek, it's only over the lack of closet space. Into the midst of this standoff rides Michael Keaton as the title character, a "bio-exorcist" who emerges from the grave determined to appall everyone as much as he possibly can. He does this much too well.

Elaborate as this sounds, there really isn't much plot here, only a parade of arbitrary visual tricks to hold the film together. Mr. Keaton, for instance, appears in one scene with a tiny carousel atop his head, bat-wings coming out of his ears, and huge, inflatable arms that turn into mallets. At another point, when asked if he can be scary, he sprouts Medusa-like snakes atop his head. And when he spins his head in another scene, he complains, "Don't you hate it when that happens?"

Mr. Burton, who seems to take his inspiration from toy stores and rock videos in equal measure, tries anything and everything for effect, and only occasionally manages something marginally funny, like a bureaucratic waiting room for the dead packed with very peculiar casualties (that shrunken head is one of them). His actors, not surprisingly, are limited by the stupidity of their material. Winona Ryder makes a good impression as the new owners' daughter, a girl much creepier than the ghosts themselves, and Glenn Shadix does what he can as their very arch decorator but, as the owners, Catherine O'Hara and Jeffrey Jones are made to behave as dopily as Mr. Keaton himself. To affirm this couple's status as bores, Dick Cavett and Robert Goulet appear as their friends.

—J.M., March 30, 1988

BEFORE THE RAIN

Written (in Macedonian, Albanian, and English, with English subtitles) and directed by Milcho Manchevski; director of photography, Manuel Teran; edited by Nicolas Gaster; music by Anastasia; production designers, Sharon Lamofsky and David Munns; produced by Judy Counihan, Cedomir Kolar, Sam Taylor, and Cat Villiers; released by Gramercy Pictures. Running time: 116 minutes.

WITH: Katrin Cartlidge (Anne), Rade Serbedzija (Aleksandar), Gregoire Colin (Kiril), and Labina Mitevska (Zamira).

In a sedate London restaurant, two people meet to discuss their marital troubles. They agree that they need more time, not realizing that there is no time left. In the background, away from the main action, an unexplained argument has begun to brew, as a waiter is taunted by an increasingly wild-eyed stranger. "Sir, I didn't do anything," the waiter insists to his boss. He appears to be right. It doesn't matter.

We will never know what the stranger's grievance was, only that it proved the point of Milcho Manchevski's devastating *Before the Rain:* that violence escalates organically and mysteriously, in ways that mean there can be no innocent bystanders in an explosive, hair-trigger world. In a film that unfolds unpredictably, with a Mobius-strip structure oddly like that of *Pulp Fiction,* the one constant becomes an air of foreboding. The birth of a lamb, a pregnant woman in a cemetery, the sight of a small boy toying with a machine gun: any of these things may signal sudden disaster.

"War torn" is the preferred cliché for events occurring near Mr. Manchevski's native Macedonia, but this film takes a more intuitive view of violence than that. "War is a virus," suggests a doctor in the film, providing a suitably unruly model for the uncontrollable peril Mr. Manchevski explores. The rain of the title is the hard rain Bob Dylan described. And the Macedonian hilltop setting where much of the film unfolds is divided by such stubborn bitterness that different parts of the landscape experience different weather.

It's a red-letter occasion when two first-time directors with films as hugely effective as *Before the Rain* and Lee Tamahori's *Once Were Warriors* make their New York debuts on the same day. Of the two, Mr. Tamahori has the brute force, while Mr. Manchevski has the poetry. Working in a sophisticated, elliptical style, he joins filmmakers as disparate as Krzystof Kieslowski (*Red*) and Atom Egoyan (*Exotica*) in finding his story's deepest meaning in hauntingly oblique connections. Ideas that defy reason, like the immutability of hatred and violence, may be best approached this way.

Before the Rain, opening today at Lincoln Plaza, begins with and returns to a remote Macedonian monastery, which might seem a safe haven from random bloodshed. It starts off peacefully, with the sight of Kiril (Gregoire Colin), a beatific-looking young priest, working in a vegetable garden. When he returns to his bedroom, he finds a surprise: Zamira (Labina Mitevska), an Albanian girl with oddly close-cropped hair, is hiding there. There would be a language barrier between these two anyway, and there is the added obstacle of Kiril's vow of silence.

As the monks meet for prayers, death makes its entrance: armed Macedonian villagers have arrived, demanding to search the monastery in their hunt for Zamira, who they say is a killer. So edgy that they wind up machine-gunning a cat, these intruders do not see in Kiril the purity that is apparent to the audience. They soon rob him of any refuge he may have known as a young monk, leaving him absolutely adrift when the episode is over. Mr. Manchevski needs no

more terrible image of an uncertain, treacherous world than the sight of Kiril lost at the end of this episode.

This opening section of the film is called "Words." The next story that is told, "Faces," is seemingly separate and may or may not occur next in time. Set in London, it features Katrin Cartlidge (who was so memorable in *Naked,* and is fine again here) as Anne, who works in a photo agency. When first seen, Anne is idly looking at two bare chests, one Madonna's, the other that of a hollow-eyed, starving man. *Before the Rain* uses such juxtapositions with chilling authority, to powerfully ironic effect.

Anne has been involved with Aleksandar (Rade Serbedzija), a rakish Pulitzer Prize–winning Macedonian photographer with a weary view of war. "Peace is an exception, not a rule," Alex maintains. Meanwhile, Anne's mother accuses her daughter, who is pregnant, of a different sort of nonchalance. "No problem is so formidable that you can't just walk away from it," her mother says icily. In fact, *Before the Rain* proves an overwhelming argument for the opposite point of view.

Breaking off with Anne during the London sequence, Alex returns to his family for an episode called "Pictures." (Mr. Serbedzija, a formidably magnetic presence, seems much more at ease during the film's non-English-speaking segments.) Not having visited the place in sixteen years, he finds his home half-destroyed and armed friends and relatives, who are Macedonian Christians, patrolling the tiny village. Nearby, at a neighboring settlement, Albanian Moslems are doing likewise.

Alex's former sweetheart, who could be Anne in a different life, lives in the Moslem village and barely dares speak to him. That is not Alex's only reason for sensing how absurd and dangerous these divisions have become. Casually, he takes a weapon away from a half-naked boy and finds that the child's uncle looks angry. It's not clear whether the uncle thinks the boy was endangered or is simply irritated to see him lose his gun.

Mr. Manchevski's taste for ambiguity sometimes leads *Before the Rain* into blatant paradoxes, so that it does not unravel with quite the satisfying completeness that *Pulp Fiction* did; after this film circles back to its denouement, a minor narrative thread involving photographs of Kiril and Zamira is left deliberately unexplained. Neither the presence of such loose ends nor the film's slight straining of its rain metaphor diminishes the final impact of an overwhelming vision.

Transfixed in horror, *Before the Rain* watches the promise of violence seep into every last aspect of its narrative. Mr. Manchevski tells his story elegantly and leaves his audience with a warning too strong to be ignored.

—J.M., February 24, 1995

BEING THERE

Directed by Hal Ashby; written by Jerzy Kosinski, based on his novel; cinematographer, Caleb Deschanel; edited by Don Zimmerman; music by Johnny Mandel; art designer, James Schoppe; produced by Andrew Braunsberg; released by United Artists. Running time: 130 minutes.

WITH: Peter Sellers (Chance), Shirley MacLaine (Eve Rand), Melvyn Douglas (Benjamin Rand), Jack Warden (President Bobby), Richard Dysart (Dr. Robert Allenby), Richard Basehart (Vladimir Skrapinov), Ruth Attaway (Louise), Dave Clennon (Thomas Franklin), Fran Brill (Sally Hayes), and Denise DuBarry (Johanna Franklin).

Being There is a stately, beautifully acted satire with a premise that's funny but fragile. Chance, the hero of Jerzy Kosinski's novel and now his screenplay, is a slow-witted innocent who has spent all his adult life in seclusion, working as a gardener and watching television. These two pursuits, and only these two, have shaped his notion of the rest of the world. *Being There* explains, among other things, how illiteracy, ignorance, and a sweet attitude can lead to riches, fame, and a glamorous social career.

Chance, who is played with brilliant understatement by Peter Sellers, is immediately mistaken for Chauncey Gardiner, an aristocratic businessman (because he wears his former benefactor's elegant hand-me-down suits) and witty raconteur (because he laughs at other people's jokes). He is admired for his fluent knowledge of Russian; this comes from nodding knowingly at a Soviet diplomat at a party. Chance also advises the President, and appears on something like *The Tonight Show.* He has been commenting on how the changing of the seasons means that all is well in the garden, and everyone mistakes this for a metaphor about economics.

Hal Ashby directs *Being There* at an unruffled, elegant pace, the better to let Mr. Sellers's double-edged mannerisms make their full impression upon the audience. Mr. Sellers never strikes a false note, as he exhibits the kind of naïveté that the film's other characters mistake for eccentricity. Not knowing polite conventions, he answers even perfunctory questions ("Will you be seated?") with hilariously excessive enthusiasm ("Yes, I will!"). Not knowing figures of speech, he begins standing like a stork when a doctor advises him to keep his weight off one foot. Not knowing the answers to certain questions, he simply doesn't answer them. This impresses his new friends as reticence of the cagiest kind.

The other fine actors in *Being There*—Melvyn Douglas as