

How Hollywood Helped Create New York

RICHARD SCHICKEL

HOLLYWOOD

A Celebration!

By David Thomson

DK Publishing: 640 pp., \$50

A WORLD HISTORY OF FILM

By Robert Sklar

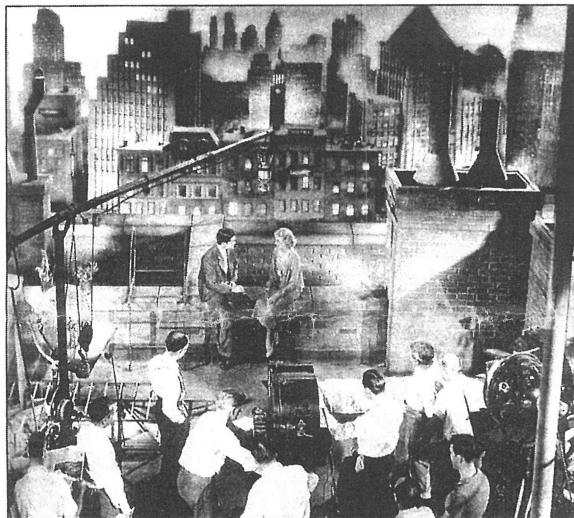
Harry N. Abrams: 600 pp., \$75

CELLULOID SKYLINE

New York and the Movies

By James Sanders

Alfred A. Knopf: 496 pp., \$45



OK, he's basically an earnest but dull fellow. Thomson is not. He's often a smart, knowing historian, even when he is indulging his penchant for eccentric literary devices and, lately, a morose self-pity (he seems to feel he's wasted his life on a medium not entirely worthy of his sensibility). "Hollywood: A Celebration!" runs counter to his current mood, but he can't quite muster the jauntiness the subtitle's exclamation point demands. He takes American movie history in decade-sized chunks, a one-page introduction locates the films in socio-historical context, and then the prominent pictures of the period are summarized in captions not exceeding 10 lines. These mostly murmur sweet, uncritical nothings, and Thomson sometimes fills them out with gossip about antique marriages and divorces. The pretty stills to which he hums his undistinguished score are derived from the Kobal Collection: They are handsomely laid out on the page, but they are, for the most part, over-familiar.

Filming "Romance in Manhattan" (1935), Ginger Rogers and Francis Lederer shared the spotlight with a set built to look like a tenement rooftop with the New York skyline in the background.

standing sets, of art director sketches and renderings of films about to be made, of behind-the-scenes shots of people busily doing the actual making, Sanders worked on this book for some 15 years, and not the least of his achievements is rescuing this visual history from archives long unconsulted.

Still, his larger, indeed, unprecedented, feat lies in the realm of intellectual history. An architect and a New Yorker, he took to heart what others have observed: that the rise of "talking pictures" had an effect more profound on the movies than temporarily immobilizing a camera to a static microphone (which is pretty much all Sklar has to say on this matter). More profoundly, sound changed the movies' central concerns from the rural to the urban. This might have happened anyway, for America itself became an essentially urban nation in the 1920s, but the demand for the kind of bright dialogue rubes did not speak caused Hollywood to recruit writers from a certain level of the New York literati: one-shot playwrights, novelists and smart-mouthed, cynical (often alcoholic) journalists. The minute they settled in Los Angeles—then and forever the anti-New York—they began dreaming of the city they had left behind, populating it with "idealized New Yorkers, polished and elegant or exquisitely rough-hewn," to be acted by a new and less poetically romantic kind of movie star: people as varied as Fred Astaire and James Cagney, Bette Davis and Katharine Hepburn. In these stars, "the style of Café Society was wed to the verbal agility of the Algonquin crowd to create an elite worthy of populating the increasingly grand city the writers were inventing."

And the art directors were building on sound stages and back lots at every studio. Some of their recreations were astounding: for instance, the to-scale, perfectly realistic Grand Central Station MGM ran up for Vincente Minnelli's "The Clock." But it was their re-imaginings, their glamorous improvements on reality, that were their great achievements. Because they often finished (or were at least well along in) their work before a director was assigned to a project, they were sometimes nothing less than the unacknowledged auteurs of many a classic movie. But, of course, a lot of the directors of this period were themselves exiled New Yorkers, too, and they contributed their yearnings to the movies' transformative envisionings of their great lost metropolis.

It is in his judicious considerations of this half-realistic, half-

imagined city that Sanders' work achieves its highest value. This is a man who can tell you how real skyscrapers constructed within the dictates of the real New York's building code help to make "King Kong's" model skyline such a powerful and moving presence in the movie—and why the modern city so disastrously failed the remake.

He can show how the interior design of the Slopers' row house in "The Heiress" affects the fate of Montgomery Clift's fortune hunter. Or how Jane Jacobs' theories of urbanism relate to the bleak drama of housing project life in "Clockers." Whether he's talking about the juxtaposition of slums and upper-class apartments in "Dead End" or the way Hepburn must carve out private space in "Holiday's" oppressive mansion, he is brilliantly acute. He performs this analytical work with unflagging energy and attention to detail on literally hundreds of movies, through the decades, through every imaginable genre (crime films, weepies, musicals, romantic comedies), bringing us, finally, to the new New York of contemporary movies.

For, as he observes, New York is now re-imagined, *in situ*, as a great living back lot for companies shooting on location there. But that merely changes the method of our re-imagining, not the impulse to do so. The city remains what the early sound films made it: the single greatest locus not just of California dreaming but of American dreaming. Sanders is the Freud of that dream, its hugely informed and gracefully civilized interpreter. And his great work causes us finally to think afresh not just about his particular subject but also about the whole vast movie enterprise. □

Taking these three books as a decidedly unscientific sample, we can perhaps risk this generalization: Most—or, to be more precise, two-thirds—of the kind of movie history that comes packaged in oversized, heavily illustrated books is a waste of time—both the writer's and the reader's. The format lures the former either to dogged excess or to lazy fatuity, the latter to narcolepsy.

The failures of excess arise because, compared with poetry, drama and the novel, film remains a relatively new expressive form; its basic technology is just a little more than 100 years old, while its ability to tell relatively complex narratives in visual form has yet to attain that age. So it remains at least theoretically possible to encompass the entire brief history of the medium in a single volume. It is to the ideal of total encompassment that victimizes Robert Sklar in "The World History of Film." The fatuity fallacy arises because movies remain the greatest of all popular art forms. We may no longer go to them in the numbers we once did, but certain movies, especially those we saw when we were young and our innocence was most seducible, exercise an apparently inviolate nostalgic hold on many of us. It is that crowd—people who just want to feel warm and fuzzy as they contemplate the movie past—that David Thomson addresses in "Hollywood: A Celebration!"

There is obviously a third—and exceedingly rare—way of approaching epic-scale film history. This effort primarily requires the choice of a highly specific topic. And one that is more original than, for example, the usual critically uninformed star or director biography or a genre study (where tone-deaf academism generally reigns) or decade-sized chaws out of the past and dressed out in heavy so-

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cio-historical woolens. This is precisely what James Sanders accomplishes in his wonderfully informed and informative "Celluloid Skyline," which is virtually without precedent in this lackluster field, given its depth of research, the richly detailed elegance of its critical argument and, most important, its ability to expand and redirect the way we think about movies.

Before turning to it, let's dispense with the books that plod the old paths. If nothing else, as Sklar's "World History" definitively demonstrates, the field is now too rich and various for effective single volume treatment. Like all of cinema's general historians, he begins his story with motion toys (the Thaumatrope, the Phenakistoscope, the Zoetrope of blessed, irrelevant memory) and proceeds, without original insight, down a path worn smooth by many a predecessor: Thomas Edison, the Patents Trust, D.W. Griffith, the rise of the star and studio systems, the coming of sound, the challenge of television and so on. There are chapters on all the significant national cinemas outside the United States, and he concludes with one on special effects that includes some potted biographies of contemporary film makers he couldn't cram in earlier.

He (or someone) decided that this book should proceed by means of the publishing equivalent of sound bites—just a few paragraphs per topic. This plan would prevent almost anyone from developing a complex critical argument, but one suspects that it suits Sklar particularly well. He likes to generalize

about the initial popular and critical response to films but rarely speaks about how history (which is the only critic that counts) has revalued them. Nor can you discover what moved or displeased him. He is a master of the weightless, unscriptive adjective—"important," "influential," "significant."

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By contrast, the first thing you notice about "Celluloid Skyline" is how utterly unfamiliar most of its illustrations are: It is full of unpopulated, oddly haunting art department reference photos of

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