



# It's a wonderful TOWN

*Visions of New York City on film*

BY JUSTINE ELIAS



**J**ust say the titles, and you know where you're going, even if you've never been there: "Breakfast at Tiffany's," "West Side Story," "Miracle on 34th Street," "The Taking of Pelham One Two Three," "On the Town." Where else but New York, the streets, subways and neighborhoods of which are instantly recognizable around the world?

"Think of all the popular movie titles with New York, Brooklyn, Harlem, Manhattan in them," says James Sanders, author of "Celluloid Skyline: New York and the Movies" (Knopf, \$45), a new book that looks at how the city has been imagined on film. "Places in New York are not just places, they are resonant gateways. They tell stories, they mean something to people. Everywhere in the world, they'll describe a neighborhood as that city's SoHo, its Madison Avenue or its Wall Street, because people will understand."

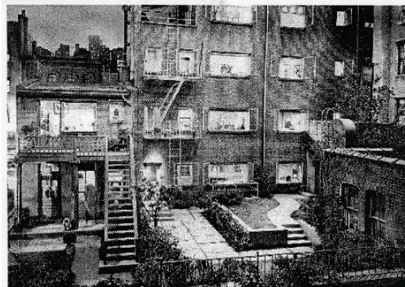
Sanders, a Tribeca architect, spent 15 years writing his lavishly illustrated 500-page tome. The idea, he says, was to explore the workings and meaning of the city he loves using a medium everyone can relate to. To that end, he examines box-office hits like "Working Girl" ("It's a sentimental story, sure, but there's a really rich interplay between

the office space, the Staten Island Ferry and the tall buildings of midtown"), black-and-white classics like "Sabrina" and "Portrait of Jennie" and futuristic visions like "Batman" and "The Fifth Element" (both of which demonstrate, he says, how past and future visions converge in the city's architecture).

Contemporary hometown directors like Woody Allen, Martin Scorsese, Spike Lee and Sidney Lumet get their due in the book, but Sanders also tracks earlier mavericks like Jules Dassin, who insisted on using real city locations instead of Hollywood backlots when he made 1948's "The Naked City." As Sanders notes, "Any movie with 'city,' 'night' or 'street' in its title was likely to be set in New York."

The same urban landscape that provided shadowy backdrops for films noirs like "Scarlet Street" and "Sweet Smell of Success" (and, later on, "Taxi Driver") was also the asphalt dance floor explored by Gene Kelly, Frank Sinatra and Jules Munshin in "On the Town." Sanders writes of that musical's "celebrated opening ... which follows the trio around the city [on] a whirlwind tour that — taking in everything from Chinatown and the Brooklyn Bridge to Rockefeller Center and Grant's Tomb — seems less a single morning's actual sightseeing itinerary than the delirious rush of sensations the bountiful city would offer anyone after months of empty sea."

Even now it's hard to look at any



**IT'S A JUNGLE OUT THERE** What James Stewart sees in Alfred Hitchcock's "Rear Window" (above), Marlon Brando in "On the Waterfront" (above r.), and Audrey Hepburn in "Breakfast at Tiffany's."

sidewalk-hogging newcomer's face and not see a bit of Gene Kelly's wonder reflected there.

Interior views of the city include Jack Lemmon's upper West Side apartment, the love nest of his philandering colleagues, in "The Apartment," and the dingy tenement where weary Thelma Ritter dies in "Pickup on South Street." But then the glittering nightclubs of "Swing Time," where Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire tap out a complicated romance, and the hot spots of "The Cotton Club" and "Mo' Better Blues" reinforce the impression that the city is the center of artistic creativity, the place where all young artists need to come.

## MILLIONS OF STORIES

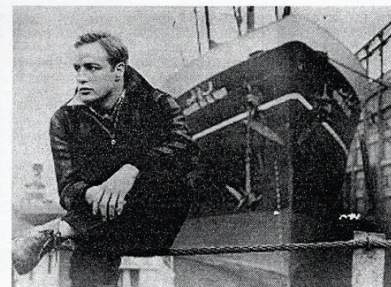
To beckon them, there is the skyline. Sanders believes Manhattan's skyline has opened more Hollywood films than any other single image.

"The reason for that is not the soaring height of the skyscrapers, but the spread — the idea that there are hundreds and hundreds of buildings, with thousands of windows in each one, and we're going to follow just one story," he says. "But from that sweeping view, you get the feeling that there are millions of stories progressing all at once, all of them fascinating."

For a single image — the Eiffel Tower, the Taj Mahal, Big Ben — to orient an audience, it has become fixed in people's minds. Ric Burns, who directed "New York: A Documentary Film," which he co-wrote with Sanders, says New York first gained a global profile not with the Empire State Building or the Chrysler Building, but with the opening of the Brooklyn Bridge in 1883. "It looked like something out of science fiction," says Burns. "You could see the Brooklyn Bridge from everywhere in the city, looming over everything."

The suspension span, a popular postcard image, became recognizable worldwide by the turn of the century. In 1919, approaching Manhattan by boat, F. Scott Fitzgerald was transfixed by the gleaming cityscape, says Burns. "Since then, it's meant a concentration of human impulses: ambition, hope, and folly. Mainly hope and ambition. You don't have to use any language to know what those buildings mean."

"That 'Celluloid Skyline' should appear after Sept. 11, the date of the most traumatic reshaping of the city's profile, saddens Sanders, but he does



not think the tragedy would have changed his book.

"The event itself, while it was compared to a movie, was horrible reality," he says. "And it hasn't yet filtered into current movies." One aspect that has, though, is the computer-assisted erasure of the World Trade Center towers from movies like "Zoolander."

"It'll be interesting to see at what point one can show the New York skyline again and not have the Sept. 11 association be immediate," says Sanders, who predicts that after new buildings or memorials go up, perhaps in three years or so, Hollywood will again show New York from south of midtown. "The blint fact is that the event will begin to fit in our memory and our history."

## IMPOSSIBLY GLAMOROUS

Each cinematic vision of the city has a way of working itself into the subconscious. Asked to pick a favorite New York movie, one that first defined the city in his mind, Burns recalls "That Touch of Mink" (1962).

"My mother was ill with cancer, and we had come into the city from Delaware, where we lived, to see her doctors, and we saw 'That Touch of Mink' at Radio City Music Hall," he says. "At intermission, the Rockettes came out and did a dance number to 'June Is Busting Out All Over.' I still remember all those midtown, Art Deco locations. It was all impossibly glamorous to a 6- or 7-year-old, and probably

warped me to this day."

That movie's most dazzling scene is when millionaire bachelor Cary Grant gives Doris Day a tour of his penthouse apartment, still under construction. The dizzying view of Manhattan, through I-beams and the metal cage of the elevator, is unforgettably romantic; it resembles some of the archival footage in "New York: A Documentary Film."

Sanders, who watched "hundreds — thousands" of movies for his research, cannot be pressed to name a favorite. But he has renewed interest in looking at two of them, "Three Days of the Condor" and the 1976 remake of "King Kong," both of which prominently feature the then-new World Trade Center towers. In the 1933 "King Kong," the enormous ape scales the Empire State Building to escape the teeming streets, but the later version dispatches Kong to the Financial District.

"The filmmakers felt duty-bound to send him to the new towers," says Sanders. "But streets downtown weren't crowded at night — certainly not in 1976. No one would have bothered him." Still, the author recalls being an undergraduate when the remake was in production, and walking down to the set with friends to gawk at the giant model ape. "There was King Kong, on the plaza, wrapped in plastic," he says. "Now, of course, it'd all be [computer-generated imagery] — King Kong would be added later. They really don't make them like they used to." ♦