Hollywood's Quintessential Limousine Lefty

by Bruce Bawer

Elaine May, left, Mike Nichols and Dorothy Loudon, appearing as panelists on "Laugh Line," in 1959.

Over the course of his long career, Mike Nichols, the comedian turned director whose *oeuvre* includes such enduring films as *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966) and *The Graduate* (1967) and the original Broadway productions of *Barefoot in the Park* and *The Odd Couple,* won an Oscar, a Grammy, four Emmys, and eight Tonys – not to mention an American Film Institute tribute, a Kennedy Center honor, and many other such accolades. Now, seven years after his death at age 83, he is the subject of a compendious new biography by

Mark Harris that is perhaps most admirable for its precise, illuminating descriptions of the ways in which Nichols achieved the effects on both stage and screen for which he was so amply rewarded.

But Harris's book isn't just an exhaustive account of an artist at work. It's also a revealing portrait of one of the twentieth century's most reliable celebrity leftists. It's no coincidence that one of his closest friends was Lillian Hellman, the unregenerate old Commie playwright who posed during the 1950s HUAC hearings as a heroine of liberty and whose "memoir" of her supposed Nazi-era heroics (which became the 1977 Jane Fonda movie *Julia*) was later proven to be a pack of lies. Another pal of his was the critic Susan Sontag, that supremely vain self-promoter and fan of the Cuban Revolution whom Roger Kimball has aptly described as "the doyenne of…radical chic."

Some of Nichols's films are relatively free of politics. Others might have been scripted by Hellman herself. *The Graduate*, widely viewed as the defining film of the boomer generation, was ultimately an *apologia* for the laziness and irresponsibility of that generation's more spoiled and privileged members. (Dustin Hoffman's creepy, shiftless hero, Benjamin, is somebody who, if he graduated from college in 2020, would probably have joined Antifa.) *Silkwood* (1983), while eminently watchable, was also a shrill contribution to the inane but then-hot anti-nuclear cause. (Harris notes that after the release of this film, with its harsh take on corporate capitalism, *Time* magazine – which hadn't yet migrated to the left – described it as exemplary of "the radical-chic politics Nichols has always favored.") *Primary Colors* (1998) indicts presidential candidate Jack Stanton, based on Bill Clinton, not for being a big-government liberal but for betraying the high noble principles supposedly associated with being a big-government liberal. And in Nichols's TV miniseries of *Angels in America* (2003), Tony

Kushner's grotesquely overpraised piece of stagey agitprop, conservatives are evil and Communists righteous.

Yet there's more. As Harris reminds us repeatedly, Nichols wasn't just a super-liberal; he was the very model of a supremely snobbish super-liberal. He was the kind of lefty who in theory had massive compassion for the lower orders but who, on his best behavior in the company of A-listers like Streep and Nicholson and Hoffman (on YouTube you can see all of them singing his praises at various award banquets), could be notoriously nasty to cabbies, waiters, and other members of the *hoi polloi*. A card-carrying socialite, Nichols inhabited the uppermost tier of Manhattan café society and was also part of what Meryl Streep describes, in Harris's book, as "that whole incestuous group out on Martha's Vineyard." Even as his movies pushed progressive propaganda, he stood out in his upscale crowd for his extreme love of luxury and (in Harris's words) "his obsession with money." Although handsomely paid throughout his adult life, he consistently lived beyond his means – "like a prince," Candice Bergen says – and resented being just a millionaire, not a billionaire. Once, when his debt was even larger than usual, a friend offered him a loan, and he asked, quite seriously: "Can you make it $25 million?" In short, Nichols loved dollars.

What kind of a man was this, who made films with strident socialist messages even as his avarice put that of any plutocrat in the shade – and who seems never to have reflected on the contradiction? That's one question that remains largely unanswered at the end of this book. While Harris is terrific at describing Nichols's skills as a film and theater director, he does a less impressive job of capturing the inner man. Could the reason be that there wasn't much of one in there? Harris quotes a *Newsweek* reviewer who opined, apropos of Nichols's Broadway staging of *The Odd Couple,* that he "imparts muscle to what he touches, but not soul." When you think about it, this could be said about a good deal of his film work:

it's glossy, snappy, and streamlined, but not always terribly deep. (It seems relevant in this regard that the last of Nichols's four wives was none other than the glossy, snappy, and streamlined TV newsreader Diane Sawyer, whom he decided to marry even before he'd met her.)

None of this is to deny the extraordinary merits of much of Nichols's work. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is a masterpiece that I, for one, have revisited at least a couple of dozen times. I've also repeatedly re-watched *Primary Colors* and *Postcards from the Edge* (1990), in which Streep plays a drug-addled actress based on the film's screenwriter, Carrie Fisher. All these films show Nichols at his best – picking scripts with strong narrative lines and arresting characters, casting top-notch actors, and directing them in a crisp, straightforward, unshowy manner, without pretentious *longueurs* or mumbled dialogue or sets engulfed in shadows. (Which, of course, may just be another way of saying that the merits of, say, *Virginia Woolf* owe less to Nichols than to Edward Albee, Elizabeth Taylor, and Richard Burton.)

Other Nichols movies are less worth a second look. Despite some funny moments, *Heartburn* (1986), written by Nora Ephron and based on her marriage to and divorce from the execrable Carl Bernstein, was below par. *Wolf* (1994), with Jack Nicholson as a werewolf, was pure nonsense. Then there's *The Birdcage* (1996), in which Robin Williams and Nathan Lane play a gay couple who run a Miami nightclub. On its release, I wrote an article for the *New York Times* comparing it unfavorably with *La Cage aux Folles,* the 1978 French film on which it's based. "Material that was touching, true and funny in the original becomes in Mr. Nichols's hands witless, false and on occasion even horrific," I complained, noting that screenwriter Elaine May's way of showing the mutual devotion of the lead characters was to have one of them present the other with a palimony agreement. "This, after they've spent 20 years together and raised a

child! Only in Hollywood would a palimony agreement be a romantic gesture."

In response to my article, Nichols, referring to me as "[t]hat poor schmuck in the *Times,*" told *Entertainment Weekly* that "[w]e weren't making *Philadelphia*. We weren't making *Longtime Companion*….We were making a comedy." Yes, so were the people who made the far superior French original. Appearing on a talk show, Nichols deliberately misrepresented my criticism, making it sound as if I was some bigot who had a problem with gay protagonists. I had forgotten this bit of mendacity until I encountered, in Harris's book, multiple references to Nichols's gift for guile. Recently, looking back at *The Birdcage* on its 25th anniversary, other writers have more or less echoed my appraisal of it. After Nichols's TV version of *Angels in America* aired, gay novelist Dale Peck noted that in both it and *The Birdcage,* Nichols ponders his gay characters "in an almost anthropological way." And it turns out, interestingly enough, that the one gay member of the film's cast also objected, at least in part, to Nichols and May's take on gay life. "The script used the word 'fag' a lot," Nathan Lane tells Harris, recalling that when the word turned up in his dialogue, he explained to Nichols that he was "a little uncomfortable" about saying it. Couldn't it be dropped? Nichols heard Lane out, but the word ultimately stayed in the picture.

Now, on the one hand, I have no problem with words like "fag" in certain comic contexts. One of the most brilliant stand-up routines ever, by Chris Rock, centered on the N-word, and would've been nowhere without it. On the other hand, the word served no meaningful purpose in *The Birdcage,* and in any case it's pretty rich for an ultra-PC guy like Nichols to have been deaf to Lane's concerns. As Lane comments: Nichols and May "were two of the smartest, most sophisticated people in the world, but they couldn't quite let go of it." Which isn't surprising in the least. Many a proud progressive may have gay

friends – or black friends – aplenty, but nonetheless tends to think about gays and blacks in stereotypical terms, viewing them less as individuals than as members of exotic subcultures (and Democratic voting blocs) upon which he, with immense self-regard, can generously shower his patronizing compassion and tolerance.

Reading in Harris's book about Nichols's politics, I was reminded several times of Tom Wolfe's famous 1970 essay "Radical Chic," about a Black Panthers fundraiser held by Nichols's close friend Leonard Bernstein. Wolfe's essay memorably captured a key moment in the history of upper-crust Manhattan progressivism; what I had forgotten was that one of the guests that evening, along with such luminaries as Richard Avedon, Barbara Walters, and Otto Preminger, was – yes – Mike Nichols (not that Harris mentions it). One virtue of Harris's book, whether intended or not (he is, as it happens, the spouse of the flagrantly socialist Kushner), is that it offers a stunning picture not just of a single fatuous left-wing "evening at Lenny's," but of an entire life marked both by garish personal greed and by tinselly celluloid gestures of *faux* empathy for the downtrodden. Hooray for Hollywood!

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