Widescreen Dreams

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OUTTAKES II


“[Derek] Green [the managing director of the British branch of the Carpenters’ record company, A&M], a song lover, admired [the Carpenters’] quality if not their bag. ‘My God, Karen’s voice! People have got to dislike music to dislike those Carpenters’ records,’ he says now. But back then, it was certainly uncool to like them. ‘Record company staffs are young, and young people want to be hip. Those in the company who did like the music were very much in the closet’” (Coleman 96).

I had a crush on Karen Carpenter. I have an image of her in my head wearing a frilly white gown, her long brown hair done up in big curls (the kind my sisters used to wake up with after sleeping in curlers the night before a prom or a bridal shower), sitting next to her brother Richard, looking more like his girlfriend than his sister—although the “love” they emanated for each other reminded me of the love I felt for my siblings, or at least the love that we were supposed to feel for each other and that seemed to exist in family portraits. Karen and Richard Carpenter looked like they were sitting for a family portrait. It must have been a shot of them as they were being introduced as guests on a Bob Hope TV special or some other kind of variety show. When they performed, Karen sat at the drums, which was so unusual for a girl. There was a masculine quality in her occasionally low voice and her handsome face—something in her thick, dark eyebrows and wide mouth, the lines around her mouth and across her forehead, and the way her hair was often combed in bangs over her forehead as if she were a boy (“Recalling her childhood once she became a globe-trotting singer, Karen said: ‘While Richard was listening to music in the basement, I was out playing baseball and football, and playing with my machine gun! I was very tomboyish, quite a character, I hear!’” [Coleman 37]). Her voice was enveloping and smooth and soothing, but with the slightest scratching sound every now and then, suggesting a twinge of pain, eating away at the edges. Meanwhile, Richard sat primly at his piano (“Developing their friendship, [Richard’s collaborator John] Bettis was surprised to find that the staid appearance of Richard did not match his inner self. ‘His sense of humor and wit, his outlook on life, his image, is the farthest thing from the way people perceive Richard,’ Bettis says. He identified a strong streak of irreverence” [Coleman 61]).

“Talking to myself and feeling old. . . .” I used to listen to that song (“Rainy Days and Mondays”) on my record player and feel guilty that Karen was singing about my life and how I had nothing to do much of
the time and didn’t have many friends—how could anyone have known so much about the way I felt inside? (“... at the war’s end [Karen and Richard’s parents] Harold and Agnes made plans to buy their own house. The pleasant environment they chose would significantly shape the lives of the future Carpenter family. New space for solid, detached, large-roomed properties with twin lawns at the front, spacious garden at the rear, and a garage” [Coleman 34]—sounds like the house I grew up in.)

I wonder if one of the reasons I felt so close to Karen Carpenter was because I had a sister, Karen, who sometimes seemed kind of boyish and whom I was often paired with because I was closest in age to her out of all my siblings—even though most of the time we hated being with each other and drove each other crazy by teasing each other. We knew exactly how to get each other mad: all she had to do was call me a girl, and all I had to do was suggest that she wasn’t girlish enough.

*Mame* (1974)

My mom took me to see the movie version of *Mame*, starring Lucille Ball, at the old Majestic Theater in the Mount Penn section of Reading, not far from where she grew up. We arrived about fifteen minutes late, just at the beginning of the scene where nine-year-old Patrick enters his Auntie Mame’s bedroom the morning after she has thrown a big party for no reason in particular (“I know that this very minute has history in it—we’re here!” she had sung the night before). He wakes her up out of a groggy, hung-over sleep, and they have a conversation about what life with Auntie Mame will be like (his parents are dead and Mame is his only living relative), what kind of school he will attend, and how, whenever he hears a word he doesn’t understand (like “bastard”), he should write it down on a little pad of paper and every now and then Mame will go over it with him. Mame chides him for looking so dreary, all dressed in gray, as if he’s just come from a funeral (he has), and she promises to make his life sunny again. She even asks him what he thinks about her and the circumstances he finds himself in, which was so exciting to me because I always loved it when my mom or some other adult would ask my opinion about something, as if I, too, were a real person: “Do you think it’s so terrible coming to live with your Auntie Mame? Don’t answer that. Your coming here is the best thing that ever happened to you. . . . We’re going to make up for everything that you’ve missed. I’m gonna show you things you never dreamed existed!” Then Mame launches into a song, “Open a New Window,” that, if I hadn’t already been completely won over by the characters and the situation, drew me
deep into the heart of this musical about the liberation of a prim little boy through the vehicle of his gutsy, fun-loving, unmarried, unembarrassed aunt. Taking Patrick by the hand, Mame flings open the drapes (two sets of floor-to-ceiling drapes, actually), throws open the French doors, goes out onto the balcony, and proudly presents the glistening East River, the Fifty-ninth Street Bridge, and all of Queens, spread out before them, just waiting to be seen and tasted:

MAME: Look at that!
PATRICK: At what?
MAME: At everything!

In song, Mame urges Patrick to become “three-dimensional,” “unconventional,” and to thumb his nose at anyone who doesn’t like it. (It wasn’t all that different from what Dolly Levi says when Ermengarde is shocked to discover that Dolly has “acquaintances,” as Ermengarde calls them, at the Harmonia Gardens Restaurant: “Not acquaintances, Ermengarde,” Dolly assures her, “friends, dear friends from days gone by. My late husband, Ephraim Levi, believed in life, any place you could find it, wherever there were people, all kinds of people. And every Friday night—even when times were bad—every Friday night, like clockwork, down those stairs of the Harmonia Gardens we came, Ephraim and I. Not acquaintances, Ermengarde, friends”; in their different ways, both Dolly and Mame believed in the immense variety of life.) As Mame and Patrick sing “Open a New Window,” they ride a pony down Beekman Place; visit the Natural History Museum; participate in a feminist rally in front of a courthouse (picketers’ signs read MATERNAL WELFARE and CONTROL BIRTH); watch a Burlesque show; dress up as firemen, ride a fire engine (but just for fun—not to a real fire), and ring the fire engine bell; go parachuting; perch themselves on one of the rays of the Statue of Liberty’s crown, dangling their feet high above New York Harbor (I knew that was fake); visit the “progressive” school in which Mame plans to enroll Patrick (where nudity is condoned and where the children run wild, pull each other’s pants down, break things, play pranks on the mailman, and just basically raise hell); visit a Christian church; visit a Jewish synagogue; drink and dance at a nightclub; ride in the paddy wagon when they and all the other nightclub patrons get arrested; and file briskly into court where Mame is friends with the judge and everyone sings in triumphant chorus, “Open a new window every day!”

Because my mom and I were late in getting to the theater, we stayed to watch the beginning of the next showing (you could still do that at most theaters in the mid-seventies). I wanted to stay and watch the
whole movie all over again. From then on, I had fantasies about making *Mame* bigger and better than it already was. I felt the film needed re-making because of the peculiar shape of its narrative. The first half is full of song and slapstick (like Lucy zooming around a department store wearing only one roller skate because she can't get it off), consisting mostly of Patrick's initiation into the frantic, colorful world of his aunt and of New York in the late twenties and early thirties. The second half, however, takes place years later when Patrick has graduated from college and is dating a rich girl, Gloria Upson, whom Mame quickly takes a strong dislike to (by this time, too, Mame's new husband, Beauregard, has died tragically in a skiing accident). There is less singing and dancing in the second half of the film, and Mame seems lonelier and more depressed than she had earlier in the film. Finally, she sings the heavy, dramatic ballad "If He Walked into My Life," about how she made mistakes in raising Patrick, whom she thinks has changed for the worse, become shallow and much less fun-loving than he was when he was a little boy. I was disturbed at the way everything turns sour in the second half of the movie, but at the same time, I liked it because it seemed true to life. I began more and more to like the idea of this musical comedy turning into a murky, gut-wrenching drama, although I had a hard time coming to terms with the fact that the shape of the story, therefore, had to be somewhat imperfect, and it seemed that one day I would be okay about it, and the next day I would be all upset by it and dissatisfied and I'd want to rewrite it with a happier ending. (In fact, *Mame* does end happily, with Patrick marrying, finally, a much nicer, Irish girl, and with Mame taking their son Peter under her wing the way she had Patrick years before, but all of this is really a coda to what feels like a long, slow slide into depression, which is appropriate since the events of the second half of the film follow on the heels of the Great Depression.) I experimented with combining elements of *Mame* with elements of *Hello, Dolly!*, a happier film, pairing Barbra and Lucy as friends, a combination, however, that only intermittently seemed to work, despite their commonalities. Basically, I was stuck with the hard truth that life often starts out happy and ends up depressing. Eventually, I came up with a solution whereby *Mame* would be considered one of the all-time great movies in Hollywood history (it surely wasn't in real life) largely because Lucille Ball's spellbinding performance (an Oscar winner, I decided) encompassed such a breathtaking range of emotions—from the heights of comic exuberance to way down deep in the shadowy valley of tears. Critics would agree that this was an unusual feat for a musical-comedy actress, but after all this was the 1970s and the Hollywood musical had come a long way since its heyday at MGM, and so it was time to
inject some hard-core seriousness into what had always seemed more or less a light, utopian, simple-minded genre. (That same year I had seen That's Entertainment, a documentary about the history of MGM musicals, with my mom and Aunt Pauline at a movie theater on the boardwalk in Ocean City, New Jersey, so I knew a little about where the Hollywood musical had come from and where it seemed to be going.) The way I came to terms with Mame and all that had happened to the Hollywood musical by the 1970s was so different, for example, from Ted Sennett's snobbish, patronizing, typically dismissive attitude; in Hollywood Musicals, a book I got for Christmas in 1981, he argues, "Misguidedly cast as the irrepressible, indestructible lady of print, stage, and screen, Ball worked gamely, handling the slapstick portions with ease and croaking out the merely average songs. But she was not an actress who could carry a musical comedy on her shoulders, and her performance mostly conveyed a sense of desperation rather than high spirits" (348).