

The Movies On My Mind:

Reversal of Fortune:
directed by Barbet Schroeder

DEVILISH APPEAL

F. Scott Fitzgerald famously said that the rich are very different from you and I. Not all the wealthy are pathological narcissists, but a signal difference between these and ordinary mortals is that they are able to gratify omnipotent fantasies of power or desire we keep safely confined to our dreams. The reality principle isn't a big item on the agenda of the moneyed gargoyles who inhabit *Reversal of Fortune*, Barbet Schroeder's mordant dissection of the notorious Martha "Sunny" Von Bulow murder case.

A Rhode Island jury was persuaded that Claus Von Bulow (in the movie, Jeremy Irons) acted out a fantasy of removing a once glamorous wife, grown tiresome through chronic depression and addiction, by injecting her with a massive overdose of insulin. (Sunny was said to have hypoglycemia. What role insulin played in her treatment remains a vexed question.) Sunny did not die, but

plunged into a permanent vegetative state.

Reversal of Fortune opens on Schroeder's characteristic note of ironic distance: the camera hovers over the body Sunny once so extravagantly abused with drugs -- now a living corpse, maintained in pristine physical health with almost religious devotion at Manhattan's Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center. Sunny's voiceover then narrates her husband's search to overturn his conviction through the unlikely offices of Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz (Ron Silver).

As in *Sunset Boulevard*, the device works to eerie, witty effect. Sunny (Glen Close) speaks of the unspeakable with a lucid, acerbic detachment one doubts she ever possessed in waking life. She poses the film's central question: *Is Claus the devil? If or even so, can the devil get justice? And will the work of the law toward proving Claus' innocence, no matter how virtuous the issues at stake, ultimately be performed in Satan's service?*

By the time he took on the Von Bulow case, Dershowitz was already famous for defending impossible cases and universally unpopular clients. But initially even he feels Von Bulow's guilt is too glaring, his devilishness too repellent to undertake an appeal. Amidst a Fifth Avenue apartment's

glitz, Claus oozes cultivated indifference and insincerity from every pore. In Iron's astonishing impersonation, Claus' ramrod stiff frame is topped by a visage subtly reminiscent of Karloff's Frankenstein, his lips congealed in a faintly derisive curl.

His voice a ceremonious bray, Claus assures Dershowitz of his respect for the "honor and integrity of the Jewish race"; then treats him as if he were an auction house flunky come to sell off an excess Chippendale, rather than to save his bacon. ("What did I tell you?", a jet-set mistress will gloat later, "HIRE THE JEW!!!") Claus may not have murdered his wife, but as a contemporary commentator said, one has to believe this sly, utterly weird creature is guilty of *something*.

Over a sumptuous lunch in a famous Manhattan eatery, Dershowitz decides to help Claus after all. He rationalizes that his enormous fee will help mount *pro bono* appeals for more deserving clients. He's also intrigued by the possibility that Claus' very privileged and soiled image may have been prejudicial to his receiving a fair trial.

But he's also drawn to Claus' sheer *chutzpah* and swayed by his formidable powers of seduction. Claus purrs that he never got full celebrity treatment until his notoriety. He

clearly implies Dershowitz is sure to share the limelight with him, win or lose.

As Dershowitz gets hooked into the enigma of Claus' role in Sunny's near-demise, he also becomes increasingly fascinated by who Claus *is*. "Anything you want me to be," Claus insinuates later. And addressing Dershowitz' comment about his general strangeness -- "**Alan, *you don't want to know...***"

Dershowitz assembles a team of present and former students, whose ethnicity and political stance Claus' circle would surely disdain. He overcomes their initial resistance by asserting that the disgustingly fortunate have as much right to good law as the worthy poor -- and besides, everyone will have one hell of a time tearing Rhode Island's shaky case against Von Bulow to shreds. Dershowitz' subsequent deconstruction proceeds from every angle of opportunity, deploying an intriguing combination of sweat, guile, and elegant intellectual effort.

When they meet Claus, the team is also both appalled and disarmed by his reptilian charm. Persuaded by the validity of the legal issues as well as the sheer exhilaration of the job, they toil with the gusto and camaraderie of an elite military outfit. Their unreflective enthusiasm renders even more subversive

Schroeder's inference that, given sufficient money and talent, *any* case could be thus undermined, regardless of merit or morality.

For the investigative and court scenes, Schroeder uses *cinema verite* techniques he employed in *General Idi Amin Dada* and the much under-rated *Barfly*. He cuts back and forth from documentary mode to flashbacks of Von Bulow's life filmed in an almost surreal style. The narrative structure grows increasingly layered and dense, as present and past are elegantly interwoven.

From Schroeder's perspective, the entire Von Bulow household was tyrannized by Sunny's narcotized and despairing narcissism into a glazed hush (Close artfully captures her character's imperious fragility). The monumental indifference one previously marked in Claus seems to have infected everyone else in his palatial Newport mansion. When he attempts to speak to his stepchildren about divorcing their mother, their heads barely swivel away from a movie they're watching, then uncannily swivel back again as one. The picture is *The Crimson Pirate*, in which Burt Lancaster boasts that he's going to pull off the greatest feat of piratical looting in history -- one of the film's many nice subliminal touches.

One learns that Sunny first became involved with Claus in order to protest her titled husband's exuberant infidelities. Each apparently soon found the other an exciting object amidst their social set's brainless torpor. When the thrills cooled, Claus turned to other women; Sunny to booze and pills.

Another pointed difference of these repellent rich: they're resolute, unrepentant, virtually alixythymic pre-Freudians, scorning knowledge of their own or anyone else's deeper motivations -- let alone acknowledging the most elementary notions of cause and effect. Therapeutic interrogation of a relationship gone troubled would be as alien as having to draw one's bath. Where we would reflect upon our frustrations, they act up or act out in aid of a quick cure.

When he wasn't servicing his latest mistress, Claus seems to have waited upon his wife's increasingly self-destructive whims with incredible permissiveness. Was this perverse devotion, or passive-aggressive encouragement of suicide, which then turned aggressively murderous?

Did Sunny represent a narcissistic object choice he was morbidly unable to live with, or without, until fate stepped in and resolved his dilemma? Or was he a remorseless

psychopath, with his eye on the prize of Sunny's fortune from the first?

Dershowitz eventually comes to believe in Claus' innocence, and convinces a Rhode Island appellate court that the evidence against his client is insufficiently probative so as to warrant another examination. Von Bulow went on to retrial and exoneration.

Despite Dershowitz' victory, Schroeder asks us to ponder its essentially equivocal nature, no matter that the unappetizing Claus' went free. One is certain that Dershowitz is deeply committed to the Bill of Rights. But when the rubber hit's the road, he's uninterested in winking out the actual cause of Sunny's death-in-life. While the lawyer was no liar, his willingness to view truth relatively, as taffy which could be pulled one way or another, his adroitness in knowing when to conceal and when to reveal, identifies him uncomfortably with his client.

Dershowitz' cunning tactics may comprise standard criminal defense. But it can be argued that he did his job, played his hand just a little too well. The screenplay Nicholas Kazan has culled from Dershowitz' own user friendly account commends the lawyer's passion for justice, at times rather tiresomely. However, it's also intimated that his own considerable

ego drove him the extra yard. And, true to Claus' prediction, the case did greatly enhance Dershowitz' celebrity status.

Dershowitz' labors gained even more urgency when, once drawn into Von Bulow's web, his own professional existence was put at risk. The threat to Dershowitz' survival peversely delights Claus' Byzantine nature, although -- or precisely because -- he might have been destroyed along with his advocate.

At one point, an insider was discovered who had been taping damaging conversations with Dershowitz about discrediting Sunny and her older children. These probably had been jury-rigged. It remains tantalizingly unclear whether the loathsome toad informer had acted on his own, was hired by Claus, by the children, or perhaps was playing both sides of the street.

Schroeder intermittently disrupts the hectic thrust of the inquiry to show us its mute, poignant text, which all concerned seem persistently on the edge of forgetting -- Sunny's comatose body, bathed in the unearthly blue light of her hospital room.

After her husband's vindication, she has the final word -- icily telling us that we will know the truth of her circumstances only when we got to be where she is (at which time, if we

are like her, we will not care). Until then, we are left to puzzle out our own conclusions on the justness or injustice of Claus' devilish appeal.

The universe unfolded by Schroeder in this fascinating tragicomedy of murderous manners is the Hobbesian daisy-chain of mutual exploitation, of family preying and prying presented in Hitchcock's *Psycho*, with Alan Dershowitz as its *post facto* hired gun/cum quasi-participant observe. Claus von Bulow occupies dead center in the film, as the alleged victim or victimizer of Sunny -- or both.

AFTERWORD

Sunny Von Bulow remained in a persistent vegetative state for 28 years, until dying in a Manhattan nursing facility in 1998. Sunny's family, including her children from the previous marriage, sued to have Claus and his daughter Cosima disinherited. (Cosima has always insisted that her father was innocent.) An agreement was finally reached out of court, whereby Claus renounced all claims on Sunny's immense fortune in favor of restoring Cosima's inheritance.

Claus returned to London after the trial, and continues living the quiet life of a wealthy

English gentleman. It's said he's unvaryingly kind and helpful to his friends and family, and a charming addition to high society parties. Apparently he still makes witty jokes about the accusations against him, as well as his striking reversal of fortune.