

## THE FILM REPORTER

### Coping with Dreams and Reality in "The Golden Land"

**HESTER STREET**, written and directed by Joan Micklin Silver (adapted from *Yekl* by Abraham Cahan). Produced by Raphael D. Silver. Black and White, P.G. Running time, 92 min. Distributed by Midwest Film Productions, Inc.

Reviewed by ISIDORE HAIBLUM

Beginning in the latter part of the 19th century, wave upon wave of Jewish immigrants — most from Eastern Europe—poured into New York's Lower East Side. They came with children in tow, packs on their backs and a jumble of inarticulate dreams and aspirations. The Old Country had done little to prepare them for the tumultuous life they found here on the shores of "Columbus' Golden Land"; they coped as best they could. *Hester Street*, Essex, Ludlow, Grand, Delancy, all became Jewish turf. The locality bubbled with life. Anarchists, Socialists and labor unions battled for ascendancy. The sweatshops hummed, bosses grew rich and worker-poets thundered their protests in rhyme. The Yiddish stage and press

blossomed. And make-shift *hedorim* competed with public schools for the hearts and minds of their charges.

Abraham Cahan, editor of the Jewish *Daily Forward*, "World's Largest Yiddish Newspaper," lived to be 91 and his journal chronicled both the hectic rise and final decline of Jewish life on the Lower East Side. Now, more than two decades after his death, a timeless movie has been fashioned by Joan Micklin Silver from Cahan's short story, *Yekl*, one that recaptures those early days by deftly focusing on small details and a mere handful of characters. It is called "*Hester Street*."

Jake works as a tailor in a sweat shop, has a girl friend, even has his own bed (others must share). His main objective, to become a full-fledged Yankee, is—at least in his own eyes—all but fulfilled. Then his wife, Gitl, arrives with their small son, Yossele. She is fresh off the boat from Russia and has brought along a host of customs that Jake, in his headlong drive toward Americanization, has sought to abandon. She speaks Yiddish, wears a *shaytel*,



(Photo: Courtesy, Midwest Film Productions, Inc.)  
JUST OFF THE BOAT and Ellis Island, Gitl and Yossele are brought to their new home on Hester Street, by Jake who is already "Americanized."

dresses in outmoded shawls. Jake howls in outrage.

The family moves into a flat of its own. Bernstein, a lapsed rabbinical student, is their boarder. All, at considerable cost, will eventually shed part of their old world heritage. The various ways they go about this task—both tragic and comic—comprise the bulk of this glowing film. The marriage, in the end, will disintegrate; Yossele will become Joey; Gitl will become Mrs. Bernstein and all these people, generations later, will become us.

Jake, as played by Steven Keats, is an out-and-out lout who not only abuses his innocent wife and chases after other women, but even frequents a lady of the night. Carol Kane is a luminous Gitl, wide-eyed with wonder and trepidation at first; then steely with resolve.

Mel Howard's Bernstein is a man who bends with the times, yet never jettisons his basic decency.

Yiddish actors, Leib Lensky and Zvee Schooler, play walk-on parts that vibrate with authentic *ta'am*. Doris Roberts is a nifty busybody landlady, and Mamie, the "other woman," as played by Dorrie Cavanaugh, comes through as a scrappy pragmatist.

In one of the film's last scenes, Gitl discards her *shaytel*, dons a stylish dress and somewhat out of character insists that her boy Yossele now be called Joey. This is the voice of Abraham Cahan—and his *Forward*—who actively fostered cultural assimilation. In *Yekl*, his didactic tale, the issue was *how to best go about it*. Jake is the bad example—a crass boor. Bernstein, the good example, teaches others *English*, prays in *Hebrew* but displays no special affection for old world culture. Others of that period did, but this frankly is outside the scope of "*Hester Street*."

Two slight imperfections: the film has crowd scenes galore, but they are strangely muted except for a jaunty piano rag on the sound track. Unlike the real East Side of yester-year, neighbors do not push, shout or intrude on each other. It is, no doubt, a matter of film-making economics, one that may easily be forgiven Ms. Silver. (Yiddish crowd scenes, after all, are even more costly than the ordinary, everyday variety.) Nor do the leads distinguish themselves with their spoken Yiddish, which makes up a third of the dialogue and which the actors apparently had to learn by rote. This can be a distraction for those who know the language. For most, however, it will make no difference. The story, which is simply about people, has a power of its own.

The overall beauty of Joan Micklin Silver's "*Hester Street*" is that it allows us to clearly see our ancestors and their era. The identity crisis they faced, which is explored so movingly, is still, in our time, unresolved. By helping us understand its roots, Ms. Silver has helped us understand ourselves. □□

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ISIDORE HAIBLUM is a writer who specializes in Yiddish and science fiction. His novel, *The Wilk Are Among Us* is available from Doubleday.