

THE FILM REPORTER



(Photo: Courtesy Allied Artists)

FLEEING ACROSS THE BORDER to avoid conscription to the Tsar's army for the war against Japan, Zanvill (Oliver Tobias) and Mendel (Henri Sera) say goodbye to Kifke (Eli Wallach) over a bottle of vodka.

ROMANCE OF A HORSE THIEF, screenplay by David Opatoshu, based on the novel by Joseph Opatoshu. Produced by Gene Gutowski. Directed by Abraham Polonsky. Music by Mort Shuman. Technicolor. Released by Allied Artists. Starring Yul Brynner, Eli Wallach, Jane Birkin, David Opatoshu, Lainie Kazan, Serge Gainsbourg and introducing Oliver Tobias.

A popular Yiddish locution *nishig geshtoygn*—*nishig geflygn*, literally “neither arose nor flew” and meaning “stuff and nonsense,” almost perfectly sums up Allied Artist’s *Romance of a Horse Thief*. This should not necessarily be taken in the pejorative sense. Let it suffice to say that this film is an out-and-out fantasy. There’s no law against the exercise of imagination, is there?

The screenplay is the work of David Opatoshu, the actor, who was born in New York City and began his acting career with the Yiddish Art Theatre. He is also the author of a memorable volume of Yiddish short stories, and as most American-born, tend to shy away from the field of Yiddish letters, he is the happy exception that, alas, proves the rule.

The film is based—in the loosest possible sense of the word—on Joseph Opatoshu’s short Yiddish novel of 1912. Joseph Opatoshu (David’s father) was one of the giants of modern Yiddish literature. Viewing his *shtetl* Malava from the squalor of the New York Jewish ghetto, he saw his hometown as endlessly vibrant and romantic. The *shtetl* crooks emerged as heroes and their derring-do spirit—if not their deeds—has been preserved by this film.

Bawdy, Lusty

So in *Romance of a Horse Thief* Abraham Polonsky, the director, and Gene Gutowski, the producer, have given us a Jewish town circa 1904 in which a large part of the population is engaged in horse stealing, no less; or so it seems. The bald-topped Cossack commander (Yul Brynner) is a friendly, good-natured chap who likes Jews. But when the Russo-Japanese war

breaks out, the Cossacks commandeer all the town horses for the Tsar. You can tell, right away, this is going to lead to trouble. Fortunately, the Jews are a bawdy, lusty, free-swinging lot (composed of David Opatoshu himself, Oliver Tobias, Eli Wallach, et. al.) who are quite capable of looking out for themselves, thank you. Romantic complications—of a sort—are interjected by the *noged*’s daughter Naomi (Jane Birkin) who is, incidentally, the charming town revolutionary (what town was without its revolutionary?) and Estusha (Lainie Kazan), the town bawd, proprietress of the principal Malavian “recreation center.” Serge Gainsbourg is a touring French revolutionary who stops by to lend a muddled hand. The musical score by Mort Shuman, mostly based on Yiddish folk tunes, is rather beautiful, as is the color and photography.

Romance of a Horse Thief is a motion picture mainly played for laughs, and if you can bear in mind that it’s all—every last minute of it—make-believe, it will probably help. □□

—ISIDORE HAIBLUM

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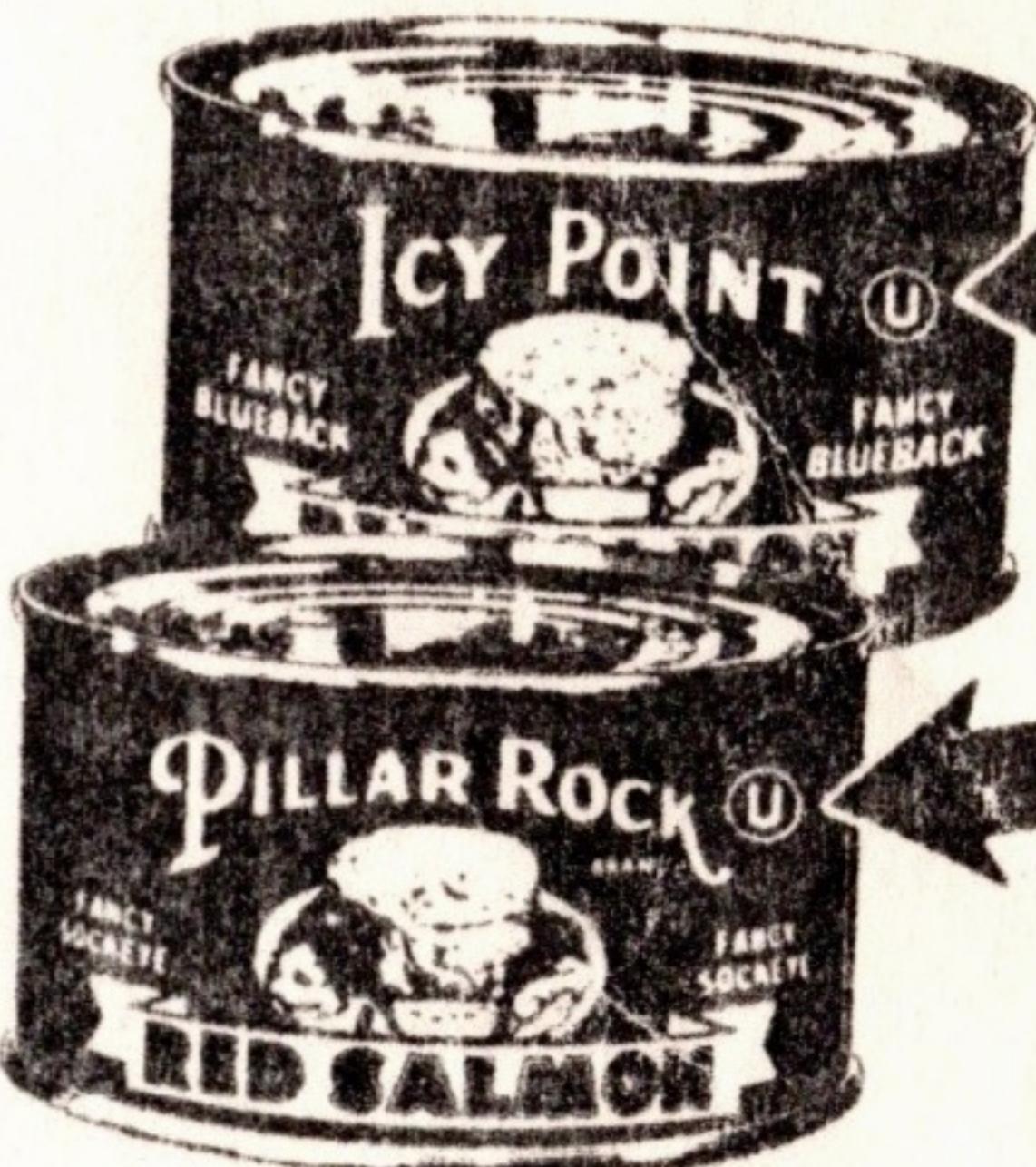
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