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THE PICTURES ANALYSTS UNSPOOLED

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When it comes to unflattering portraits of mental-health professionals on film, Glen O. Gabbard, as they say, wrote the book. Gabbard, a psychoanalyst and a professor of psychiatry at Baylor College of Medicine, in Houston, is the author of "Psychiatry and the Cinema," a study of Hollywood's transference issues. Gabbard's book offers a catalogue of pompous quacks ("Mr. Deeds Goes to Town"), swingers with Prince Valiant hairdos ("What's New Pussycat?"), sadistic enforcers of social conformity ("One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest"), love-starved lady doctors ("The Prince of Tides"), and serial killers who eat their patients ("Silence of the Lambs"). "I wouldn't say that I'm angry about it, but I sometimes feel a little annoyed," Gabbard said the other day. "It's the buffoonery that gets to me."

Gabbard, a balding, avuncular man in his fifties, was in town for the American Psychoanalytic Association's Winter Meeting, at the Waldorf-Astoria, where he moderated a symposium about the latest cinematic assault on his profession, a comedy called "The Treatment." The movie, which opens in May, stars Chris Eigeman as an anxious Manhattan private-school English teacher, and Ian Holm

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as his bullying and meddlesome psychoanalyst.

The panelists included Daniel Menaker, the Random House editor and the author of the novel on which “The Treatment” is based, and Oren Rudavsky, its director. Menaker wrote the book after ten years in analysis. “I love analysts—they’re the salt of the earth,” he told Gabbard. “Well, maybe the cardamom of the earth.” Rudavsky is back on the couch after a three-year hiatus. He optioned Menaker’s book during his first go-round, after abandoning a plan to film actual sessions in his analyst’s office.

Gabbard opened with a joke (“I tend to start on time, because I was toilet trained in utero, and my patients deeply resent me for it”). Then he introduced Rudavsky, who, before screening clips from “The Treatment,” announced that he had dedicated the film to his own analyst, Jay R. Greenberg. “He’s probably somewhere in this hotel, but he promised that he wouldn’t come in here,” he said.

After the clips, some of the shrinks stepped up to a microphone to offer their thoughts. Alice Brand Bartlett said that she was moved by the film’s “poignant depiction of neurotic suffering,” while Alan Skolnikoff appreciated its satirical edge. He said, “I thought that was the point, rather than any kind of veridical representation of what analysis is.”

Not everyone agreed. David Goldman, a psychiatrist, said, “The film builds up a caricature of an analyst as someone who tries to manage and control you using some kind of weird, altered approach.” Rhona Engels, a psychotherapist, wondered why movies seem to offer three-dimensional portraits of patients but not of therapists. “I think it might have something to do with the power of what we do,” she said. “It can only be portrayed through projection—a kind of cutting down to size.”

Gabbard said simply, “If they ever showed an

actual hour of therapy, it would be so boring that people would demand their money back.”

Afterward, Gabbard joined the panelists for dinner. At one point, someone suggested coming up with a list of movies that portray psychiatrists in a favorable light. Rudavsky named “Suddenly Last Summer,” in which Montgomery Clift plays a psychiatrist who saves Elizabeth Taylor from having a lobotomy. “Yes,” Gabbard said with a sigh. “That was from the golden age of psychiatry in the cinema.”

“How about that Marshall Brickman comedy ‘Lovesick,’ with Dudley Moore and Elizabeth McGovern?” Menaker said. “I thought it was quite charming.”

“True, but it’s about an analyst who sleeps with his patient,” Gabbard said.

Gabbard’s own list included “Ordinary People,” but, he noted, “It’s the Hollywood version of therapy, which usually involves a dramatic, cathartic cure, brought about by a de-repressed memory of a traumatic childhood event, followed by tears and hugging.” He also cited the 1997 film “Good Will Hunting.” “It’s over the top, and the therapist uses methods that are unconventional and even outrageous,” he said. “But a naïve audience member could see it and come away with the impression that sometimes therapy actually helps people.”

— *Adam Green*

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