

DEAF, DUMB 'N' DAZZLING

A deviant dilettante or the only director in the British cinema? Ken Russell strikes again, courtesy of the rock revolution.

Downy is the sort of film that makes me glad I haven't been exactly hit with the usual "master plan" over the past few years. Because I realize that Downy really is a masterpiece, and this is why: (a) it is beautiful. (b) it is the best realization to date of a superior musical play, and (c) it is the best film to date by the most exciting director working in British films today, Ken Russell.

Compared with exquisite pain and torment, Downy must have been nearly decided to fall into Russell's hands from the day it was written. Unmistakable was his as director when the film project was first discussed. The only reason to be wanting was the quality of Russell's visual interpretation. Refrained to not the word one would immediately associate with him, but nevertheless, there is in Downy bits of the hysteria that distinguished his classical master films, and it's highly unlikely that anyone is going to protest that he's dug out his thing out of Downy's mode that wasn't poking through his earlier work.

This is not to say, of course, that Russell has strided himself on the production value. Indeed he has done everything that would be expected of a director let loose with Robert Wagner's cheque book, and every penny shows on the screen in what constitutes a highly edited sequence of Downy's life. It's impossible to detail every remarkable sequence, many superbly photographed by Dick Bush, brilliantly scored by Toros Rosal, practically every image has a power of its own, that occasionally the intent of overuse concerned someone to produce an effect which either reads a dime up the spine or a bang in the chest. . . or both. The little-remembered scene in which Downy joins a congregation of gnomes (and men and virgins at the pleasure bar of Marilyn Monroe's shrine) may sound like an opportunity, but the over-the-top flourish with which it's filmed (coupled with the insouciantly impudent baroque) produces a cultishly effective that's difficult to describe.

Not one of the other major scenes from the opera has a disappointment. Russell handles each in his with individual care. All in all Downy is an unforgettable experience that cannot



Roger Daltry acts naturally as Tim Turner impales him

merely close to "losing your soul" (or) however the publicists campaign terms it. Despite even the considerable disadvantage of listening to the film in draft-off stereo (as opposed to the splendour of the Lyricette Square Theatre), I'm sure that I was moved to the brink of an immense self-actual experience at those over-the-top performances. This, I might add, had nothing to do with Downy's simple intelligibility reaching out for me. It was more concerned with the pleasure that comes from deep involvement with any work of art.

From the subtitle to the premiere. Remember Mr. This Day is no longer just promotional film produced on the cheap by Gary Cotton's management and shown up from them with a resulting loss of sound and picture quality that I found unacceptable. And

yet this book is being published as a Gary Cotton spectacle that gives him the chance to "let Gary in your door once and for all!" This is presumably a reference to one shamefully staged "screen test" sequence in which Mr. Cotton shifts up a couple of stunt men with a few long-winded lines to the camera. For the rest of the hour he wanders through a recording studio, up the lifts to Tower and across the stage of the Rainbow Theatre in a manner that is at all too familiar.

Madder On Ice

You're making an hour longer work with your hands. You have no sound system on your stage (and camera, and the soundtrack you're going to have to make do with a record, the best of dialogue will be top

your attempts at music) so you're either going to have to be very obvious in pitch a step away from known already. Or if you're Ken Russell, both.

Not that Downy was made on a shoestring. In fact the glossy splendour of it all suggests more of a bookening. Obviously producer Stephen's earlier involvement of Gross and Binkley hasn't served the genre beyond his.

Bill a budget isn't everything. Witness the 17 budget in London. What really comes across in Downy is Russell's impatience as a filmmaker. The characters of Downy's opera has been flattened into a two-dimensional parody of modernism's aesthetic. The parody itself is pursued through a parade of cinematic images for which the word "boredom" might well have been invented — rock or vintage Gramercy Parkings, the arrival of commensurate society (Robert Jones coming out of the TV), plus the usual assortment of Paradise clubs (found in the Lake District).

The lack of subtlety, however, pales before the gaping spiritual emptiness of the film. Russell, like Lou Reed and Brian, has driven his creative anger against the point where his work is indistinguishable from the "real" thing. Except, of course, to the filmmaker's belief, sitting back in the comfort of the motivation. They read into every look gesture. Look, there's Russell as a critic of the holiday camp! Look, it's every political!

Not one third of the surface in Downy, not one moment is filled in anything beyond the barest outline of Downy that can stimulate without connecting to any real world in any way. The film purveys all the search-imagery of the best TV ads, and the finest cinematography of the event, which it more often simulates. It can only hope that after he's finished getting Rick Wadsworth to write lines for the other scenes he'll say, "Oh dear! Oh dear! Oh dear! I am just not sure the last scene — a telephone booth collapse being allowed against the incoming crowd, two naked women being strangled by a mobile ICT machine (as Robert Russell is an RAF captain, so he stops doing Broadway Madder's 11th Symphony,

