

# The Screen: 'Miss Mary'

**"MISS MARY"** the new Argentine film by María Luisa Bemberg ("Camila"), recalls life in pre-Peronist Argentina, mostly through the eyes of an English nanny, Miss Mary (Julie Christie), who arrives in Buenos Aires in 1938 to care for the children of an aristocratic landowner and leaves in 1945, on the eve of Perón's election to the presidency.

Though Miss Mary is played with a good deal of intelligence by Miss Christie, the character doesn't make a perfect, perhaps through which to examine such a complex social-political scene, Miss Mary's vision of the world is as clouded as the audience's understanding of her. She's a function of the film, rather than its reason for being.

Miss Mary is initially starchy and awed by the wealth that surrounds her. The great estancia on which the family spends most of its time is a dislocated domain, a place where the manners are ostentatiously upper-class English grafted onto the heritage of feudal Spain. Miss Mary is lost, but she responds with common sense and warmth to the affection of the children.

These are Johnny, the teen-ager who falls in love with her; Carolina, the bright, emotionally troubled elder daughter, and Teresa, the pretty, spoiled, youngest child.

The other members of the household are the children's parents, the autocratic Alfredo and the beautiful Mecha, a birdlike woman who tries to accept her husband's infidelities (and when she can't, retires to what she calls "my little cry-room"), and Mecha's brother, a staunch Fascist and Franco supporter, who later, like Perón, marries beneath him.

In the course of her employment, Miss Mary observes — without responding in any interesting way — the manners of a society in which women are regarded either as the property of men or as the instruments of the devil.

The screenplay, written by Miss Bemberg and Jorge Goldenberg, is somewhat like the donkey who found himself equidistant between two bales of hay and starved to death. The film can never make up its mind whether it's going to devote itself to the story of Miss Mary or of Argentina. The result is that both remain opaque.

Why Miss Mary should stay on in Argentina, after being fired from her

## Three Little Lambs

**MISS MARY**, directed by María Luisa Bemberg; screenplay by Jorge Goldenberg and Miss Bemberg; original idea by Miss Bemberg, Beda Docampo Feijoo and Juan Bautista Stagnaro; director of photography, Miguel Rodríguez; edited by Cesar D'Angiolillo; produced by Lita Stantic; released by New World Pictures. At Cinema 1, Third Avenue at 60th Street. Running time: 100 minutes. This film is rated R.

Miss Mary	Julie Christie
Mecha	Nucha Guevara
Perla	Luisina Brando
Alfredo	Tato Pavlovsky
Ernesto	Gerardo Romano
Abuelo	Iris Margit
Abuela	Gaetano Battaglia
Carolina	Sofia Viruboff
Johnny	Donald McIntyre
Teresa	Barbara Bunge

job (for good if unfortunate reasons), is never made clear, except that it works for the convenience of the story. "Miss Mary" is at its best when it's simply reporting the specific details of the way a small group of extremely privileged people lived — what they wore, what they talked about, what made them angry or sad — in a land they created but never fully understood. It was a world ripe for the appearance of a Perón; that is, for the appearance of someone, even a demagogue, who understood the country well enough to give it a sense of national identity.

In her "Camila," Argentina's nominee for the Oscar as the best foreign-language film last year, Miss Bemberg, without effort, evoked the political and social history of mid-19th-century Argentina entirely within the terms of a florid, true-life romance: the fatal affair of a Buenos Aires heiress and the young Roman Catholic priest with whom she eloped.

"Camila" is a remarkably effective piece of social-political filmmaking, partly because its true concerns are built into the fate of its doomed lovers. For all of its 19th-century mannerisms, "Camila" is spare and lean. Nothing seems superfluous or obscure.

"Miss Mary," which opens today at the Cinema 1, never achieves that sense of uncluttered unity. It's as awkward and lumpy as the series of flashbacks in which the tale is told. These seem always to be joining — arbitrarily — some key event in Miss Mary's life to some great moment of modern Argentine history, confusing the importance of each.

- VINCENT CANBY