Scoundrels' Humorous, 'Beggars' Routine

Gay Play at Brattle

By Richard Howland, '62

"School for Scoundrels", a farce now playing at the Brattle, satirizes the notion that there is an easy way to go through life. Anyone can succeed by using the proper play at the proper time. The secret of success—anything at all—go to school.

Based on Lifemanship

The movie is based on the "Lifemanship" books by Steven Potter, tells of a man who goes to school to learn how to get along in the world. Picture Palfrey, the hereditary owner of a small investment firm, who bumps into a beautiful sad girl on a bus and gets a date. He, it would seem, is a winner. But he is other-directed—others being his employer, his landlady, and his best friend, who steals the girl.

Learning Gambits

In despair Palfrey signs up for "The School of Lifemanship", headed by Stephen Potter, who is masterfully played by Altair Sim. There Palfrey learns Gamemanship (how to win against better players), Oneupmanship (how to keep the initiative), Lifemanship (the secret of winning) and wamsanship—how to be one-up on the girl without marrying her.

Lifemanship Triumphant

Palfrey returns, and in quick succession makes his leading employee-cower before him, brow-beats his current, beats his rival and marries the girl. But in what is scheduled for a love scene, he forgets his training and asks the girl to marry him.

Here the movie departs from the spirit of the Potter books. As a satire, it loses its point at the end. Potter, throughout the movie, is railing against the notion that success can be gained merely by using the appropriate gambits and plays. At the same time, he is drawing a beautiful caricature of the man who thinks that success can be a substitute for experience and ability.

The conclusion contradicts the trend of the movie. In Potter's books, the fulfillment of his themes hinges upon the exasperation of the point of farce, and upon their overwhelming success. While this movie succeeds admirably in Potter's redicuto ad absurdum down to the final scene—in that scene the punch is lost. Instead of seducing the girl, Palfrey (what a name!) marries her.

J. C. Michael does an adequate job as Palfrey. Graham Thomas the villainous best friend seems more roguish by the minute.

By Leo Lampert, '60

The current film at the Brattle, The Beggar's Opera, is a disappointing version of the 18th century opera written by John Gay and adapted by Christopher Fry. Many of the original songs have been included on the film, with the additional music by author Bliss imposed on the sound track.

Swashbuckler

The work was given a "Errol Flynn treatment"—but with Sir Laurence Olivier in the leading role. Olivier's songs, sung while swooping at a pansy-eyed Hollywood's horses, seem ridicules. In fact, most of John Gay's delightful music was ruined by the cinematic necessity of having the performers act while they sing.

This clash between 18th century opera and 20th century music was aggravated by the anarchonism of Bliss' music, which separated and swamped Gay's songs.

Like Gay's Songs

Still, Gay's music was there, and it lingered after Bliss and Olivier were forgotten. If you have not heard the music of The Beggar's Opera, you will find the film more entertaining than an evening of television.