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Midler in 'Hocus Pocus'/Andrei Codrescu in 'Road Scholar' The Tired and the Inspired

BY MARK HALL AMITIN

Whenever Bette Midler returns to the screen, something inside me says I'm in for a treat, whether it's a clunker or not. As we know Bette has been cursed by a few recent turkeys (*Jinxed*, *Stella*, *Scenes from a Mall*) but she has more often than not given us some wonderful performances, especially when she lets loose with a few tunes. Last year's *For the Boys* was given the shaft by most of the press, but the drubbing was unwarranted. An across-the-board look at *The Rose*, *Big Business*, *Outrageous Fortune*,

Film *Down and Out in Beverly Hills*, *Beaches* and *Ruthless People* reveals that Midler has kicked ass more often than not. First and foremost, she's an entertainer and always larger than life.

In Disney's *Hocus Pocus*, Midler holds together this rather pedestrian and chintzy children's film with her usual centrifugal force. She is ably abetted by her co-stars, fellow sister-witches Kathy Najimy (*Soap Dish*, *Sister Act*) and Sarah Jessica Parker (*Footloose*, *Honeymoon in Las Vegas*), who together are a cross between the Three Stooges and the Marx sisters.

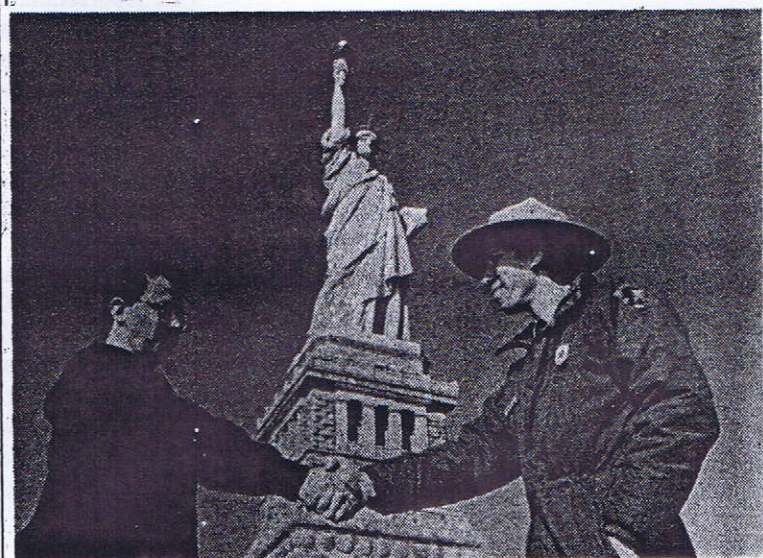
Set in Salem, Mass., the story begins 300 years ago when the Sanderson sisters are put to death for witchcraft. Their curse states that if on All Hallows' Eve a virgin should light their black candle, the three will return to life. Flash to Halloween 1993, the new boy in town, Max

Dennison (Omri Katz), is forced by Mom and Dad to take his smarty-pants little sister, Dani (Thora Birch), house to house trick-or-treating. Along with Max's new heart-throb, Allison, played with rubile abandon by model Vinessa Shaw, they wander into the old Sanderson house, where Max lights the candle (leaving us to postulate on Allison's state of virginity) and "poof," Bette et. al. appear.

On flying brooms and vacuum cleaners, the Sandersons manage to spook the entire town's kiddies to come over so they can suck the life force out of them and stay young forever. There's Bix, the talking cat, a corpse come back to life (who quite literally keeps losing his head) and a couple of crude skin-head dudes and the like to fill out the cast, but unless our three witches are on screen and up to their slapstick antics, you just wish the rest of them would go away.

There is one priceless highlight, and that's Bette leading the sister trio in a chorus of Screamin' Jay Hawkins' "I Put a Spell on You." Director Kenny Ortega is also responsible for last year's Disney bomb, *Newsies*. Shouldn't they just let Bette direct?

On the other hand, there is the bright and witty low budget, PBSish travel flick, *Road Scholar*. As it opens, you wonder, where's Bill Moyers? But, before you know it, Romanian émigré and raconteur extraordinaire Andrei Codrescu has you hooked with his wry humor and outsider's clarity on what America is in all its glory, foibles, past promises and future dreams. Director-producer Roger Weisberg follows Codrescu as he glides across our highways, byways and freeways in a gigantic 1968 red Cadillac convertible. Moving from the East to West coast in a Kerouacian voyage, Codrescu introduces us to an assortment of bizzaro Americanos that make us the potchkeed patchwork of



Andrei Codrescu shakes hands with a park ranger in a scene from 'Road Scholar.'

Photo: David Graham

a nation that we are. Early in the film Allen Ginsberg walks the streets of the Lower East Side with Andrei telling us how Jack said in *On the Road* that "the earth is an Indian thing." We are constantly reminded of this throughout the film and the purest and clearest of the encounters is with an Indian clan in Taos, New Mexico.

The assortment of lifestyles and personalities ranges from an insular religious community in upstate New York — similar to the Pennsylvania

Dutch, where young men and women don't even hold hands and there is no TV — to a homeless black couple in Detroit who are making art in the streets. Codrescu reminds us of his first encounter upon arriving in America when glimpsing the Statue of Liberty and naming her the "cover girl of democracy." Lest we forget, we were all once of that "wretched refuse on the teeming shore." ■