

Modest, Decent and Eccentric

NO TRICKS IN MY POCKET

Paul Newman Directs.
By Stewart Stern.
231 pp. New York:
Grove Press. \$17.95.

By Michael Bloom

THE filming of a play, especially by a director who is not an *auteur*, would not seem to be the most gripping idea for a book. There are few moving shots to record, no complex storyboarding and not even an original screenplay left in ruins. Even if the director is a matinee idol, the result may be, to borrow a Hollywood phrase, "underwhelming."

Yet the veteran screenwriter Stewart Stern (the author of "Rachel, Rachel" and "Rebel Without a Cause") has fashioned a surprisingly vivid and instructive chronicle of the rehearsals for the 1987 film of "The Glass Menagerie," directed by Paul Newman. Avoiding the common pitfalls of journals, Mr. Stern records sharp close-ups of all the participants while keeping our focus on the larger issues. "No Tricks in My Pocket" reads like a good novel because Mr. Stern holds in suspense several interesting story lines. Will John Malkovich, playing Tom, unleash the emotional power the director believes him capable of? Will the other actors, who have performed the play onstage many times, be able to adjust to a new director and the camera? And how will the director and cinematographer, two willful personalities, resolve their differences?

One of Mr. Stern's singular accomplishments is an honest, complex portrait of, rather than a bland tribute to, his longtime friend. Mr. Newman comes across as modest, decent and eccentric — a star who has had to cultivate an "anesthetized affect" to protect his inner self. When rehearsals begin, Mr. Newman appears scattered, aloof and slow to praise. But after some initial stumbling, he emerges as an active and insightful acting coach, prodding his charges with the staple of the director's vocabulary: the well-chosen action verb.

However, Mr. Stern astutely observes that this plain-spoken director's verbal "images often lack 'juice.' He doesn't prime actors like pumps by sharing

Michael Bloom is a stage director who also writes frequently on the arts.



BARRY WETCHER

Paul Newman, right, directing John Malkovich during the filming of "The Glass Menagerie." In the background is Joanne Woodward, who also stars in the movie.

dreams, affective memories, colorful allusions." Yet he does exhibit a canny sense of when and how to approach an actor who is solidly rooted in his character. He provides James Naughton, who plays the gentleman caller, with a series of tiny physical tasks (for example, adjusting his jacket and trousers) to keep him busy, and he trusts that Mr. Malkovich, a stubbornly improvisatory actor, will find his fullest inspiration when the camera rolls.

A visual conservative who rejects overall concepts, Mr. Newman dodges the crucial issue of how the film will visualize memory until a quarrel breaks out between him and his imaginative cinematographer, Michael Ballhaus. But when the director finally decides, in opposition to Mr. Ballhaus, that Tom's internal monologues must always occur in the present, he defends his choice with unassailable logic: "The reason I want Tom to keep coming back to the present is to remind us what it cost him to run away from the past." Mr. Stern's cogent narrative would seem to disprove Mr. New-

man's assertion, before rehearsals began, that "the big issues you start out with [can] evaporate in the course of the interpretive process."

In a brief final entry, Mr. Stern evaluates the finished film, but the core of his book is a highly perceptive re-creation of the movie's 12 days of rehearsal. When Joanne Woodward, who plays Amanda, arrives one morning with news of President Ronald Reagan's dogged commitment to "Star Wars," Mr. Stern notices how her rage becomes a subtext and distorts her confrontation with Karen Allen's Laura. When the lack of room on a staircase produces a new moment of intimacy between Mr. Malkovich and Ms. Allen, we see how happy accidents are essential to rehearsals. And the author is careful to emphasize the creativity in the friction between Mr. Newman and Mr. Malkovich. By soaking up and magnifying the day-to-day changes, with an acuity that is normally only the director's, Mr. Stern offers an uncommonly insightful guide to understanding the rehearsal process. □