



Monday, May. 26, 1986

Cinema: Well, Hello Molly Ringwald!

By Richard Corliss

11:30 a.m. Eased into my battered '80 Camaro and tooled on out to the Valley to spend a day with Molly Ringwald, movie star and exemplary California teen. The northern Los Angeles home she shares with her parents and older brother and sister is modest, cluttered, comfortable, welcoming. "Sometimes her fans get the address and drive by real slow and stare," says Molly's mom Adele, "but then, I guess, they say, 'Naw, that can't be Molly Ringwald's house.'" Along with her family, the 18-year-old star of *Sixteen Candles*, *The Breakfast Club* and *Pretty in Pink* copes with fame by hiding in plain sight.

Adele is in the cramped kitchen, slicing leftover turkey to the beat of a Merle Haggard cassette. The sideboards groan with jars of jelly beans, Tootsie Rolls and beef jerky from the shop that her father Bob manages in a nearby office building. Molly's brother Kelly, 19, has cleared space on the kitchen table to do homework for his computer studies at the local community college. Beth, 21, is in the back of the house washing her blond hair. The whole place scans like Steven Spielberg's idea of suburban paradise.

Noise from the 18-year-old's bedroom, the one that years before her latest movie was already decorated in pink--the blinds, the iron bed, the vanity, the dresser. A gust of stardust, and in breezes Molly: impossibly clear complexion (considering her deep-fry diet), hair like Ronald McDonald's, the famous waxed-candy lips semaphoring a smile. Today she is dressed in black, with standard-teen tribal earrings (diamond-encrusted loops, ruby stud in left ear), and as she says, "Hi," she piles her hair into a Wilma Flintstone topknot.

Pretty in pictures, she is prettier in person. Critic Pauline Kael's phrase, "charismatic normality," has Molly nailed. The charisma sets her apart as the one young movie actress who can set teens queueing at the box office--though typically, in today's fragmented pop culture, she remains virtually unknown to anyone over 30--and whose punk-flapper fashion sense is imitated by thousands of "Ringlets," her very own girl groupies. They pay tribute by dyeing their hair orange (as she does, from her natural dark reddish brown), smearing lipstick from nose to chin and dressing in Molly's unique designer-junk shop couture. Her normality makes her something more resonant than this month's Madonna. Molly Ringwald is both hip enough to be the style setter of Right Now and traditional enough to be any American teen of the past 50 years.

Hey, Molly, let's go out boppin'.

Andy Hardy had it easy. The town of Carvel, where MGM set its 15 popular Hardy-family films between 1937 and 1947, knew no crime or addiction. The lawns in front of those two-story white houses were as smooth as an Emerald City carpet, and Dad's morning newspaper always landed smartly on the front porch. When girls gossiped about "the pill," they were referring to an % unpopular guy at the far end of the study hall. If Go-Getting Teenager Andy Hardy (Mickey Rooney) got "in trouble" with a debutante or chorus girl, it wouldn't be that kind of trouble--just the yelp of puppy love. And it wouldn't end in jail or a shotgun marriage but with a sympathetic lecture from his omniscient father Judge Hardy. The teen landscape on '40s movie screens was like Eden without the apple.

Andie Walsh has it tough. At her mid-'80s high school, the setting for *Pretty in Pink*, the rich kids cut the unrich with cold shoulders and easy slurs. It is the Sharks vs. the Jets all over again; this time the weapons are not switchblades but attitude. Andie (Molly Ringwald) is a "poor girl" pursued by a freaky-geeky boy pal, whose devotion drives her bats, and in love with a rich boy who may not be strong enough to declare his finer feelings and risk his friends' derision. So who comforts Andie? Why, her dear dilapidated dad. He's no Judge Hardy, but he can be counted on to give sympathy and take pity. And yes, love will find Andie Walsh, at the senior prom of her dreams.

Welcome to the '80s, the retro Time Warp that tosses all previous decades in a Cuisinart and purees them into *The Latest Thing*. We are the '30s gone hip, the '40s with leaner muscles, the '50s in Reeboks, the '60s with no sweat. And if movies are the gilded reflection of American popular culture, then a half-century of movies about teenagers traces a curious evolution of the adolescent spirit. The Andy Hardy series gave us romance without passion. The James Dean movies of the '50s offered passion without pleasure. In the "beach-party" pictures of the early '60s, teenagers got pleasure but no sex; and in the recent gross-outs of *Porky's* and its progeny, kids found sex without commitment. Decades passed, and movie teenagers never grew up, they just grew hornier. Were these flawless bodies and voracious libidos the true mirrors of teen age? Or did kids, even those looking for wish fulfillment in the dark, want movies that shed a little light on their own lives?

With the three films they made together, Molly Ringwald and Writer-Producer-Director John Hughes showed teenagers that rose-tinted light. *Sixteen Candles* (1984), *The Breakfast Club* (1985) and this spring's hit *Pretty in Pink* succeed because they are about the kids who go see them--not the locker-room sadists, lubricious cheerleaders and barons of barf who populate the *Porky's* films, but teendom's silent majority of average, middle-class suburban kids.

The "Molly trilogy" mines the emotional convulsions that make every teenager feel he or she is the first lonely explorer on the dark side of the moon. Hughes is 36, but he provides no adult's-eye view of teen problems. Instead, he gets spookily in sync with the swooning narcissism of adolescence: that teachers are torturers, that parents are sweet but don't quite understand, that friends and lovers are two distinct species, one domestic, one alien, that I feel all these things I can never express, that there must be someone out there who will love me to pieces. Hughes give teens what they want in life and movies: romance, passion, pleasure, commitment--and a little sex. His pictures are like teen psychotherapy with a guaranteed happy ending.

They are also funny movies, finely crafted and boasting spectacular ensemble acting. Some of the young actors--Anthony Michael Hall, Emilio Estevez, Judd Nelson, Andrew McCarthy--have become brand names, a veritable Hughes' Who, in any household with an occupant under 18. But in these films they are consorts to the princess in pink. "Molly is in a class of her own," Hughes says, "as a bankable box-office attraction. Now audiences will go see a 'Molly Ringwald film.'" Hughes wrote his scripts for her, tailored the characters to her precocious range of emotions, found in her the focal point for his films. The symbiosis has paid off. Hughes is one of Hollywood's most distinctive and powerful moviemakers, and Ringwald is our model modern teen.

12:15. Molly's white BMW jackrabbits through the midday traffic as she drives from home to drop by her dad's luncheonette in Van Nuys. Bob's Snack Bar: "Where the Elite Meet to Eat." Ringwald, a burly, gray-bearded man, has been blind since he was ten; he took over the restaurant last year under a Government program to teach retail-management skills to the handicapped. Most days he is up at 5 and works in the shop until late afternoon. When Molly greets him, he stage-whispers, "I can't have you coming in like this. All my customers will be lined up for autographs instead of at the cash register." Proud dad. Proud daughter too. "I just admire him so much," she says, as she grabs two cups of coffee and slides behind a table.

With a little help from Molly, Bob has "seen" all of his daughter's films. She read him the *Pretty in Pink* script several times; at the premiere, she sat beside him and whispered descriptions of the sets, costumes and gestures. "Didn't think it was much of a story," Bob says bluntly, and he is as cheerfully caustic to his regular customers. His goal is to buy his own snack shop or maybe even a small restaurant-nightclub where the Great Pacific Jazz Band, the septet he has led from his piano for 20 years, can play. These days, they've got a regular Sunday gig in Encino. Sometimes Molly drops by to sing.

She started singing before she could talk, serenading her toes in a language of her own invention. As a toddler in Sacramento, she crooned to the dogs and cats. One day, while Bob noodled on the piano, Adele noticed that Molly was la-la-ing with bang-on pitch and phrasing. Soon she was on the stage of the California State Fair, her dad's band backing her, and belting out *You Gotta See Momma Every Night* or *You Won't See Momma at All*. The audience gave this three-year-old a standing O, and Bob told the crowd, "Someday, I'm gonna be known as the father of Molly Ringwald."

Molly the blues singer, that is. The one who recorded an album, *Molly Sings*, when she was six. Whose favorite vocalists were Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald. Who, for a second-grade show-and-tell about a famous American (in which most of the boys dressed as George Washington and most of the girls as Florence Nightingale), showed up as Bessie Smith, in a big old dress and a perm like an Afro. "When I was a little kid," Molly says, "I thought I would grow up to be black and sing jazz in nightclubs."

"She could remember anything if it was rhymed or set to music," says Adele, who made sure the Ringwald home was filled not only with music but with the voices of people reading to other people. Adele would read to Bob and the children; soon, through her seductive pedagogy, the children were reading to their father. "At bedtime," Molly recalls, "she would read us a Dr. Seuss book, and then suddenly she'd stop, turn out the lights and hide the book. The next day we'd tear the house apart looking for it so we could read what happened next." When Molly was six, Adele posed as her secret pen pal, writing and mailing letters to her daughter. "Every letter would reach a climax," Molly says, "with my secret pal hanging by a daisy off the edge of a cliff or over a pit of alligators. Then the letter would say, 'Well, have to go now. Write me back, and I'll finish the story.' "

At four, Molly began kibitzing at a nearby community theater. At five, she) was the Dormouse in *Alice in Wonderland*; at six, a preacher's child in Truman Capote's *The Grass Harp*; at eight, she did a guest appearance on TV's *The New Mickey Mouse Club*; then, at nine, the role of Kate in the West Coast production of *Annie*. Molly's promise as an actress, and Bob's search for better jazz bookings, brought the Ringwald family to Los Angeles and their San Fernando Valley home. She snagged a continuing role in Norman Lear's girls' school sitcom, *The Facts of Life*, but was cut after the first year. "I was devastated," Molly says. "But my mom kept saying it was for the best, and she was right. I didn't work for a year, which gave me a chance to grow up a lot." Good thing too: by now she was all of 13.

And ready for destiny's casting call. Writer-Director Paul Mazursky auditioned Molly for a crucial role in his film *Tempest*. "I came in, and Paul told me he was going to throw a penny at me for every dumb thing I said. Whatever I said, plink, he just kept tossing them. Pretty soon he was throwing nickels and quarters and dollars, and I just kept talking. When the interview was over, I reached down and gathered up all the money and put it in my pocket. He asked if he could have his money back, and I said no."

Mollywood Ending No. 1: she got the part. To help this budding Valley Girl pass as a New York teenager, Mazursky set Molly and her parents up in a Greenwich Village flat. "It was bizarre after California," she grimaces. "Like, people urinating in the hallways." Still, she did fine. Mollywood Ending No. 2: she won critics' raves, a Golden Globe nomination and the particular attention of John Hughes, a screenwriter who was looking to direct a story about teenagers.

1:15. The BMW streaks across the Hollywood Hills toward the gigantic Tower Records store on Sunset

Boulevard. Molly pops into the dashboard tape deck a cassette by her favorite Los Angeles band, the Rave-Ups. The glove compartment is so stuffed with tapes it won't close, and the back seat is littered with the plastic placentas of cassette containers. The bikers and pink-haired punkettes hanging out in front of Tower Records recognize Molly even before she parks, but the mode is cool: a slow nod, a thin smile and distance. In one corner of the store, David Lee Roth, the motor-mouthing rock star, signs autographs, but Molly is too shy to approach him. Instead, she gets down to business, striking surgically at every rack in the store: rock, pop, jazz, country, blues. The tab is \$93.59.

\$ Next stop: Melrose Avenue. To shop the trendy boutiques of Melrose with Molly Ringwald is to watch elegant saleswomen grovel. Having word get out that this young fashion plate buys from your shop is the rag-trade equivalent of hitting all six numbers in the California lottery. At Comme des Garçons, a tiny Frenchwoman behind the counter compliments Molly on her Paleolithic do and watches her try on a pair of suede lace-up granny shoes. \$49, and out she strides, in her late-for-the-train gait, past two punked-out teens. "That was Molly Ringwald!" one insists. "No, it wasn't," her elder companion sighs. "It was just one of those people dressed up like her."

Ned Tanen, president of the motionpicture group at Paramount, calls John Hughes "the Steven Spielberg of youth comedy." Fair enough: Hollywood has always been a town that rewards arrested adolescence and those who can profitably memorialize it. If E.T. and Raiders of the Lost Ark seem made for children of all ages, from four to 14, then Sixteen Candles provides their older brothers and sisters with answers to the question: Is there life after junior high? Hughes' first film as writer-director is, sure, a sentimental fantasy with just enough wild-party footage to keep the Porky's crowd from nodding off. But for teens in search of tips on language, behavior and all the right moves, Sixteen Candles functions as a therapeutic documentary, a sort of survival kit of '80s cool. And for the rest of us, it offers a fine old time at the movies.

It is Samantha Baker's 16th birthday, but her preoccupied parents have forgotten it. Sam (Ringwald) is a sophomore, in strangulated love with a dishy senior (Michael Schoeffling) and shadowed by a crypto-hip freshman called the Geek (Anthony Michael Hall), who, in one of his more winsome moments, asks Sam if he can borrow her underpants. The plot, which will be reprised in Pretty in Pink, is familiar from schlock immemorial, but Hughes' acute ear for teen talk makes it fresh and funny. Listen to Sam and her girlfriend Randy (Liane Curtis) wax ironic on every girl's dream for the day she turns sweet 16: "There'd be a big party, and a band and tons of people, and a pink Trans Am in the driveway with a ribbon around it, and some incredibly gorgeous guy that you meet, like in France, and you do it on a cloud without getting pregnant or herpes."

Sam: I don't need a cloud.

Randy: Just a pink Trans Am and the guy!

Sam: A black one.

Randy: A black guy?

Sam: A black Trans Am. A pink guy.

In Hughes' second film, *The Breakfast Club*, the mood is edgier and more combative: you and you and you and you and me against the whole rotten adult world. Five high schoolers--a jock (Emilio Estevez), a rebel (Judd Nelson), a brain (Anthony Michael Hall), a beatnik (Ally Sheedy) and a princess (Molly)-- spend a Saturday in detention. All they have in common are secret sins, an ache for camaraderie and a festering resentment of parental and school domination. There is little music, not much action, just kids sitting around talking. Good talk, though. The brain, ragged by the rebel as "a neo-maxi zoom dweebie," explains that he faked the age on his I.D. "so I can vote." And before they bridge gaps of class and temperament, the rebel purrs the poetry of erotic menace in the virgin

princess's ear: "Have you ever been felt up? Over the bra, under the blouse, shoes off, hopin' to God your parents don't walk in? . . . Over the panties, no bra, blouse unbuttoned, Calvins in a ball on the front seat, past 11 on a school night?"

Not since Noel Coward . . . well, has a comic dramatist written vernacular dialogue this smart this fast. Hughes has been known to bat out 74 script pages in a night; no first draft takes more than a week. Such informed, automatic writing demands that you live inside your subject, and for Hughes the bell is always ringing on the first day of class. "He has an incredible memory--visual, audio, emotional--of his own high school years," notes James Spader, who played the deliciously haughty preppie Steff in *Pretty in Pink*. "He's very much in touch with the adolescent part of himself," Sheedy says. It's a golden touch. Who wouldn't grab the chance to remake one's adolescence, in which the geek in one's closet now has the swagger of fearless charm, and a rock symphony swells in the parking lot on prom night? "I think he's still trying to be popular at school," says Jon Cryer, who played Duckie, the geeky dervish in *Pretty in Pink*. "And more power to him. I mean, he wound up marrying a cheerleader (Nancy, his wife of 16 years). And now he's got the Porsche."

But first he had to get the princess. Molly was in one of her door-slamming moods the day in 1983 that Hughes flew from his Chicago home with the *Sixteen Candles* script, which he had written for her and Michael Hall. Their first chat put her in better humor. She must have realized that in tastes and sensibilities, she and Hughes were about the same age: 15. "We each started to know what the other one was thinking," says Molly. "We would finish sentences for each other."

On the set as well, Hughes was both an overgrown kid, with spiky hair and high-top basketball shoes, and a big brother. He encouraged his bright young actors to improvise dialogue and make suggestions about the films' structures. Says Howard Deutch, who directed Hughes' screenplay of *Pretty in Pink*, "I've never seen a writer who is so willing to adapt his dialogue and script." (Thanks in part to urgings from his cast, a female-flesh scene was removed from *The Breakfast Club*.) Hughes took the youngsters to rock concerts, hosted cast dinners or simply made himself available to listen. But in this elite of young comers, it was Molly he coddled. "I figured we'd just make *Sixteen Candles*," she recalls, "but John said, 'It's going to be Hughes-Ringwald and Ringwald-Hughes in a whole string of movies!'"

It made for a nifty little string, with Ringwald fleshing out on screen the teen heroines he had scribbled on paper. Samantha Baker, Claire Standish and Andie Walsh are of different classes (sophomore, senior, senior) and different classes (middle, moneyed, working poor). But they share qualities that Hughes must have seen in Ringwald: a coiled poise, a resilient sense of humor about herself, an openness to emotions. Without forcing feelings, Molly can coax them effortlessly to the surface. Feel bad, Sam? Her face puffs, flushes and blotches; depression looks like an instant allergy. Feel good, Andie? Her face lights up like a neon billboard on Sunset Strip. "She has this terrific ability to express things without saying anything," says Judd Nelson. "She lets you see into her for a moment. And then, when she wants to, she turns it off."

And now, maybe, she wants to turn Hughes off. Molly can hardly regret being made a star in successful comedies written by a man who enjoyed playing both Svengali and pal to a gifted young actress. But gratitude does not mean indentured servitude. "When John moved from Chicago to L.A. after *The Breakfast Club*," she says, "he changed. I wouldn't say he 'went Hollywood,' but he started looking very GQ. I don't really see him anymore. I still respect him a lot, and if he gave me a good script, I'd read it. But I don't think we'll work together again real soon." Sorry, all you Ringlets and Breakfast Clubbers. Molly's cutting the Hughes-Ringwald umbilical string. Time to grow up.

4:30. Lunch, finally, at Chianti, a Melrose Avenue favorite of Molly's. Her usual cuisine is less fastidious: hash browns, fried chicken strips with an orange-whip drink and, a Ringwald special, catsup-drenched onion rings from which the onions have been eviscerated--fried batter au Heinz.

Today, though, she orders sliced tomatoes with vinaigrette and char-grilled chicken over shoestring potatoes.

After the day's fourth cup of coffee and eleventh cigarette, Molly's off to the Sherman Oaks Galleria, the Mecca of Valley Girls. If Andy Hardy's life was small town, Molly and her generation's is mall town: cruising the stores and the guys for a little post-innocent fun. Today's purchase is a portable tape player, a present for Mom. We detour to glom some sweaters, to pet the hamsters in the pet shop, to try on some beige Shiseido lipstick. Molly resists (and transcends) the Valley Girl stereotype, though she lives and speaks a variation of it. During a photo session she'll say, "This pose is, like, totally uncomfortable."

Bob and Adele's little girl has already banked about \$1 million from her last three films and is likely to make about that much for her next one. She has signed a development deal with United Artists. The very Warren Beatty, ladies and gentlemen, has squired Molly to political dinners. Beatty's company is producing the film she begins shooting this week, *The Pickup Artist*, Director James Toback's romantic comedy about a young schoolteacher on the make and the feisty museum guide he targets. Beatty has had Ringwald in mind for a movie project since he saw her in *Tempest*. Even then, he says, he was struck by her "level of intelligence and spontaneity, the lack of affectation in her acting. And obviously her good looks." (About her relationship with Beatty, she once sarcastically blurted out, "Of course, I'm expecting his child.") And as if all these perks and paeans weren't enough, next month Molly graduates from high school.

While Ringwald's agent scans the dozen or so scripts that arrive each week, Molly blueprints a conservative future beyond *The Pickup Artist*. College, but not this fall. Marriage and motherhood, someday. A Broadway musical, if the mix is right. Her next movie, scheduled for later this year, is Peter Bogdanovich's film version of the off-Broadway play *To Gillian on Her 37th Birthday*. These projects may answer the question many of her friends have about Ringwald's career. Paul Mazursky: "Will she take the next step and do adult roles, women who are worried about something more than what to wear to the dance? It's a tough transition. But I think she'll make it."

There is every good reason to think so, for Molly reads herself--her personality and priorities--like a wise child devouring a Dr. Seuss book. "One of the most important things about being an actress," she says, "is to have a strong sense of your own experience, emotions and style. That's one reason I admire Diane Keaton. She has a real aura and personality, a style of her own. I like Jessica Lange, because she can be vulnerable and still strong. And from movies of the '30s, Carole Lombard--her wackiness, her timing for comedy, her beauty that's not exactly classic but it's sexy and comes from her humor."

So strange, this young woman with a thrift shop's jumble of cultural references. She knows the repertoire of every long-ago blues chanteuse as if it were today's Top 40; yet when she asks a companion, "What was it like back in the '60s?" he has to remember she was born during the Tet offensive. She's Valley Girl and flapper, trendsetter and Mom and Dad's unspoiled little girl.

Bored with the galleria, Molly drops off her day's escort, flashes a good-bye smile, and vrooms away toward--what? Molly's a night owl, but not always at nightclubs. She has a new video camera and loves to film improvised "talk shows" with friends (no special guy just now). Tonight maybe she'll take in a movie, or even stay home. There's no rush to experience everything this minute; plenty of time for an 18-year-old cresting on stardom and maturity. The night is as young as Molly, and as full of pleasures and promises.

Be well, princess. Stay swell.

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