

Anne Baxter draws on experience

By Jay Padroff
Special to The Globe

Don't be surprised if there's a touch of Alfred Hitchcock, Bette Davis, and Maria Ouspenskaya in Anne Baxter's latest movie role, James Ivory's gently satirical "Jane Austen in Manhattan" (now at the Orson Welles in Cambridge). Baxter gathered her memories of theatrical types she has known and "put them all in the Cuisinart." Her special blend results in the character of Lillianna, a high-strung, overly dedicated acting teacher who is striving to wrest away a newly discovered Austen play from young Robert Powell, her former lover, who heads a rival theater company.

"Lillianna could have been played in a very humorless way," Baxter warns. "But she's like aameleon. When she's dealing with humorless money people from the foundation, she takes on their colors. When she begins to 'cat-and-mouse' with Robert Powell, however, she drops some of her theatricality."

For "Jane Austen," the Oscar-winning actress drew most from her experience as the youngest pupil of the legendary Ouspenskaya. "She would in secret give us a symbol, like a china figurine or a pot of geraniums or a banana, and then she would outline improvisation. None of us knew what anyone else was, but by the end of it we had to guess very closely what someone else was playing. Working with me may be six or seven other people, she required enormous concentration. That's the secret of anything: concentration."

Concentrating on an austere lemonade at the posh Regent Hotel Bar in midtown Manhattan, the effervescent Baxter reveals that she returned to the movie screen for the opportunity of working with a director she greatly ad-



Anne Baxter as Lillianna in "Jane Austen in Manhattan."

mires: James Ivory. "Shakespeare Wallah" was the first thing I ever saw that Jim did. It was a fascinating piece, and I enjoyed it hugely. I also loved "The Europeans."

On the set of "Jane Austen," Baxter found Ivory nearly the opposite of Hitchcock, who directed her opposite Montgomery Cliff in "I Confess," two decades ago. "Hitch had seen the film totally finished in his head before shooting, so it was almost boring for him to put it on film. Hitch wasn't always very nice. It was difficult if you felt strongly about doing something that he hadn't planned on."

But, says Baxter, Ivory gets "inspired right there on the spot. He does not have everything formulated." Baxter recalls how while preparing to shoot one morning in an East Village loft, her hair up in curlers, Ivory approached her and said, "Anne, I wonder if you'd mind..." Sure enough, Baxter wears the curlers for a crucial scene in "Jane Austen." "Jim would like to shoot the whole thing like an improvisation. He doesn't sit you down and intellectualize the scene at all. He's not a verbal man, really. He de-

pends a lot on intuition, and he wants the unexpected.

"On the other hand," Baxter continues, "he has enough respect for Ruth that he wants her dialogue, so we don't change anything without checking with her." "Ruth" is screenwriter and prize-winning novelist Ruth Praver Jhabvala, who scripts most of Ivory's films. "Ruth's dialogue is like a *pousse-cafe*: many-layered. You should know *all* the colors, and sometimes it's difficult. She's a most unusual, subtle woman."

Having recently concluded a nationwide tour of regional theaters and universities with her one-woman, autobiographical show entitled "Fairy Tales Are Not Just For Children," Baxter looks forward to writing her second book and to making more movies. Three-and-a-half decades have passed since she won an Academy Award for best supporting actress in "The Razor's Edge." Her well-remembered title role in "All About Eve" netted her an Oscar nomination, but she and costar Bette Davis canceled each other out in that year's voting.

Visiting New York briefly from her home in Connecticut, Baxter takes satisfaction in noting that her autobiography, "Intermission" - published by G. P. Putnam's Sons in 1976 and still selling in paperback - is about to become a film. "Intermission" deals mostly with Baxter in her late 30s, when she put aside her acting career and set off with her new husband for a rustic life in Australia.

"I'd had a career long enough, and if I'd been a civil servant, I could have been retired." The film would be shot largely in Australia, and Baxter feels that an Australian director such as Gillian Armstrong ("My Brilliant Career") "would be wonderful." Baxter concludes, "It could be an excellent movie - if they do it right."