

'The Cotton Club' a confused but lavish period piece

Frank Bruni

Review

Set in the late '20s and early '30s, *The Cotton Club*, so named for a famous Harlem nightclub that boasted legendary jazz performers, is the kind of film studio people euphemistically label a "period piece," which means that its plot does not live up to its production. Overpopulated and underdeveloped, the story told by director Francis Coppola's most extravagant effort to date comes across as an excuse to resurrect the past lavishly, and often pointlessly.

At the center of film are two love affairs, each fraught with enough conflict to merit an entire film's attention and not merely the sporadic scenes given them by Coppola and novelist William Kennedy's confused screenplay.

There is the story of Dixie Dwyer, ace coronet player who saves the life of gangster Dutch Schultz and, thereby, earns an unwanted position in the Dutchman's entourage and Vera Cicero, the gangster's golden-haired, gold-digging mistress. Dixie is entrapped by his service to Schultz, Vera by the financial favors she desires from him. Their feelings for each other prove immensely inconvenient.

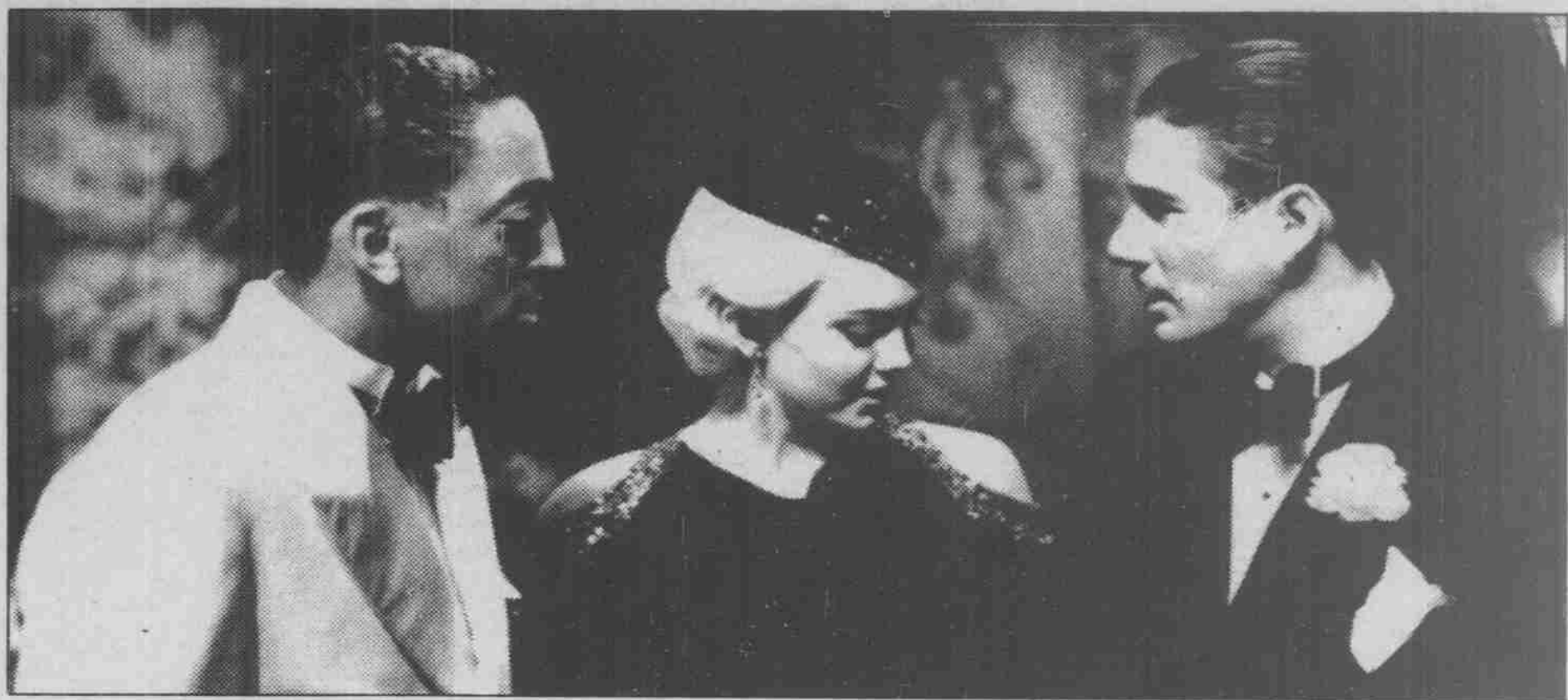
Equally frustrated are dancer Sandman Williams and singer Lila Rose Oliver, who are initially employed by the Harlem hot spot, where uniformly black performers entertain a uniformly white audience. Sandman is fired after the club's manager repeatedly catches him wooing Lila backstage. Compounding the distance between them is her subsequent employment in an all-white club (she's light-skinned enough to pass for white) that won't allow him entrance.

Through Dixie and Sandman we meet a variety of underworld figures whose dealings are only as shady as the screenplay's rushed, befuddling explanation of them. The intermittent attention given these characters further obscures the film's focus. While neither love story is given the development to claim the film as its own, the gangster melodrama is remarkably sketchy and suspenseless.

Indeed, the \$64,000 question in regards to this \$50 million film is precisely what it is supposed to be about.

From what is known of the film's turbulent production history, it seems safe to assume that producer Robert Evans, who first conceived the idea, had in mind a *Godfather*-esque drama. Once Coppola was signed on, things were bound to change. To his credit, Coppola is not a director out to replicate his earlier work.

But the attention he gave to *The*



"The Cotton Club" is a portrait of the legendary Harlem night club where talent of the Jazz age entertained.

Cotton Club's undeniably stunning look does not produce the kind of dramatic results his equally painstaking attention to character in the former film did. Both pairs of lovers are handsome, but their dialogue is restricted to statements of the obvious and cliché-ridden laments. Even fine actors like Richard Gere, who plays Dixie, and Gregory Hines, who plays Sandman, can't bring these mannequin-characters to convincing life.

It is not that Coppola has lost his skill as a director. There are moments of sheer brilliance in *The Cotton Club*. In one scene, Dixie and Vera steal away from the Dutchman to spend a passionate night together. As they embrace, the shadows cast by street light filtering through a curtained window form a grid-like pattern on their naked bodies. That image says more about their imprisonment at fate's hands than any line of dialogue could.

Coppola's skill is equally evident in the film's final montage sequence, which cuts back and forth from the tap-dancing Sandman to a gruesome mob killing. For this brief moment, one finally grasps what Coppola is perhaps attempting to do - evoke the *energy* of the era, the pulse that united music and violence. That this comes so late in the film is regrettable.

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Dancers from The Royal Ballet of Flanders will be at UNC Feb. 23.

Dance guild sees exciting, diverse 1985 performances

By ELIZABETH ELLEN
Staff Writer

Troupes specializing in ballet, contemporary dance and folk dance will perform at UNC during the Triangle Dance Guild's 1985 season. Widely diverse performers will come to North Carolina from equally diverse home bases — Belgium, Chicago, New York and Mexico.

The first performance of the series will be given by the Joseph Holmes Dance Theatre Feb. 9. One of Chicago's most popular companies, the 15-member group is in its 11th year of presenting contemporary dance to audiences in the Windy City and beyond. A critically acclaimed dance suite set to Aretha Franklin recordings will be included in the group's Chapel Hill debut.

The Royal Ballet of Flanders will perform Feb. 23. With a repertoire of over 100 ballets, the Royal Ballet strives to live up to its policy of "performing a variety of ballets whose authors belong to the most differing dance orientations and conceptions." The company, founded in 1969, was declared the official ballet of Belgium in 1976 by the Belgian monarchs. The Chapel Hill performance is part of the group's third North American tour.

America's most celebrated male dancer, Edward Villella, will appear on March 22 with his company. Villella will speak on the art of dance and the work of his mentor, the late choreographer George Balanchine. Villella worked with Balanchine for many years at the New York City Ballet and originated roles in many Balanchine pieces. Retirement from the NYC Ballet has opened the lecture-performance circuit to the former principal dancer.

The Guild's season finale will be a March 30 performance by the Ballet

Folclorico Nacional de Mexico. Founder Silvia Lozano directs the lavish productions of Mexico's official dance company. The 50-member troupe, which specializes in traditional Mexican folk dance, is visiting Chapel Hill on its 25th anniversary tour.

All performances will begin at 8 p.m. in Memorial Hall.

"This year's season is an interesting mix," said Linda Wright, the Carolina Union's major productions administrator. "The Joseph Holmes troupe's style is ethnic and modern, while the Royal Ballet specializes in lyrical, classical dance. In contrast, the Mexican company presents a traditional spectacle. Villella stresses ballet and draws upon an athletic background."

Tickets for the entire Triangle Dance Guild season will be on sale at the Carolina Union Box Office through Feb. 8. A student discount is available. Call 962-1449 for ticket information.

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 - *3. Kung Pao Shrimp and Chic
 4. Bar-B-Q Chicken Wings
- Wednesday
1. Beef and Green Peppers
 2. Sweet and Sour Port
 - *3. Kung Pao Chicken
 4. Shrimp and Vegetables
 5. Bar-B-Q Chicken Wings

- Thursday
1. Beef with Broccoli
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 - *4. Pork Tofu and Vegetables
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- Friday
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Fellows participate in various activities including: monthly suppers with outstanding leaders in the Community, service projects for the University, summer internships, leadership seminars, and self-awareness retreats.

If you would like to meet current Fellows and learn more about the Program, there will be two Open Houses in the Carolina Union. These are informal gatherings so please come as you are.

The Open Houses will be: Friday, January 11th — 3 to 5 P.M. — Rm. 224, Union
Sunday, January 13th — 3 to 5 P.M. — Rm. 224, Union

Application blanks may be obtained from RA's, at the Union Desk, in the Fellows Lounge (Room 11, Student Union), and O1 Steele Building. Completed applications are due in the Fellows Program Office (in lounge) by 12:00 NOON on January 18th.

We look forward to meeting you at one of the Open Houses and hope you will apply.

Sincerely,
Shirley Hunter
Acting Director
Tonja Wynn
Chairperson - Selection Committee