

'Good Mother' turns bad with Nimoy's stale direction

By JAMES DEAN
Staff Writer

Every so often in American cinema a melodrama comes along that takes on a contemporary social problem. The film usually gets lots of publicity and is praised for its audacity and sincerity. People get sucked into going and end up weeping during the final credits.

An especially good example is Robert Redford's "Ordinary People," which deals with teenage suicide and the break-up of an American middle class family. Also, Mark Rydell's excellent "On Golden Pond" overcomes the awkwardness of casting Henry and Jane Fonda in the same film and successfully portrays the anguish of a bitter father-daughter relationship. But these are pretty much exceptions.

Usually, these films suffer from creating characters so overly-analytical and self-aware that the audience either runs screaming from the theatre desperate for a return to real life, or it's deceived by the false emotions of the film and treats the subject with undeserved honesty. James L. Brook's appallingly overwrought, "Terms of Endearment" exemplifies this, by covering adultery, divorce, middle-aged sex and the dreaded cancer, all in the space of two hours without really getting to the root of any of the issues.

Recently, the American melodrama has become a little rarer. Because of the thematic shift to adolescence — you know, all those John Hughes movies — it has taken a while for the Hollywood studios to regain faith in the mainstream adult movie. But the past few years have seen a change back to the theme of adults with reassur-

ing success, marked somewhat ignominiously by Adrian Lyne's "Fatal Attraction," and a better James Brooks film, "Broadcast News." The time is ripe for another, and the amazingly profitable Touchstone Pictures, who brought you "Three Men and a Baby," "Roger Rabbit" and "Good Morning, Vietnam," and who can do no wrong, have come up with **The Good Mother**, an adaptation of Sue Miller's acclaimed novel about a divorced mother who is threatened with losing custody of her child.

The film has potential to work successfully as melodrama because it touches quite explicitly on something that has not been touched before. Unfortunately it fails to rise above the stereotypical nature of its story.

The Good Mother is Anna Dunlop. Her ex-husband is a lawyer who has run off with his secretary. Their marriage was pretty horrible anyway, and she is somewhat liberated by the divorce. Yes, life is hard for the Good Mother; she's always been shy, she has to do her laundry at the Laundromat, she works in a laboratory cleaning test-tubes and talking to herself because none of her fellow employees talks to her, and she is so poor that she has to borrow money from her grandfather, who never liked her. She would be terribly lonely if she did not have her 6-year old daughter, Molly.

She lives for Molly and does her best to give her a liberal upbringing. "Does a baby grow in the stomach, Mommy?" asks the inquisitive child. "No, honey, in the uterus," replies the Good Mother.

The Good Mother meets Leo, a sculptor, in the Laundromat and eventually plucks up the courage to call him for a date. They go out

and end up sleeping together. It's her first time for ages, and she blooms a little with him. More importantly, Molly begins to like him. The Good Mother is happy, until...

Molly's father takes Molly away for the weekend, and returns early to say that he is not bringing her back. She told him that Leo has done something he should not have with Molly. The Good Mother has not acted responsibly, and the nasty ex-husband is determined to keep his daughter through legal proceedings.

The remainder of the film shows the legal battle for Molly, which is hard on the Good Mother. She is forced to compromise her ideals and she loses the new-found impetus in her life because of it. It seems very unfair.

I suppose that "The Good Mother" could have been an extremely moving and poignant film. It contains a sensitive social theme, about which we should feel strongly, and relies on that to work dramatically. Because it deals with the ambiguities of child abuse, it is a narratively groundbreaking film that challenges its audience to contemplate the subject matter. At the same time, however, it is painfully safe and set in a rigid structure that destroys the potential for the real emotional involvement that the subject matter deserves.

This is Leonard Nimoy's fourth film as a director. His first three films, "Star Trek III" and "IV" and "Three Men and a Baby" all grossed over \$100 million, and were well-made and enjoyable. Nimoy, however, is the wrong man for the job here. He got away with deflating most of the funny moments in his previous films, because they were funny anyway.

'Accused' shows rape explicitly, but with good reason

By RICHARD SMITH
Staff Writer

The facts alone are as shocking as the movie itself. A rape is reported in America every six minutes (who knows how many go unreported). One in every four rapes is committed by two or more men.

The Accused is not just a movie with a message — it's a movie with a mission, and it is looking for converts. It is based on a true story about a young woman who was gang-raped on a pool table in a Massachusetts bar. The film discreetly moves the events to Oregon.

The rape occurs at The Mill, in a dark back room full of video games, pinball machines and loud music. Sarah Tobias enters, ready for some drinks and a good time

after an argument with her boyfriend. She is dressed provocatively. She has a few drinks. She smokes a little pot. She catches the eye of many men in the bar. She flirts with some of them. She plays pinball with a couple of them, one a college student. She dances, erotically, for an older man. She lets him kiss her, which attracts the attention of other male drinkers. They cheer and encourage them. Sarah says, still in his grasp, that she has to go home. The man lifts her onto the pinball machine, and as the cheers and applause continues, as the man sees his opportunity, the rape suddenly, violently begins. She is systematically raped by three men. Others watch, others cheer.

Sarah is attractive. She flirts. She dresses provocatively. If you saw her strutting down Franklin

Street, you would probably say, "She's asking for it." And you'd be wrong. Nobody, *nobody*, asks to be raped.

The rape is the most explicit scene I have ever witnessed in cinema. You may question director Jonathan Kaplan's judgment in including it. But it is not gratuitous, it is vital — not just to the film, but for the audience to understand what rape is, what really happens every six minutes in this country.

It is not the sort of film where you are invited to make your own judgment as the evidence stacks on both sides. The rape happened. Even though we only witness it when the case gets to trial, it is presented from the outset as fact. "The Accused" is a very objective film. It knows what it wants to

say, and says it.

Yet all the elements of the courtroom drama are there. For the most part "The Accused" follows the standard narrative path: reluctant witnesses, behind-the-scenes deals between lawyers, revisiting the scene of the crime in search of clues. The film is all the better for it: With such harrowing subject matter it is reassuring to feel grounded with the familiar.

The main success of "The Accused" as a film is due to excellent casting, the tour de force performance of Jodie Foster in the lead, and its unashamedly graphic portrayal of its narrative. It is not for the faint-hearted, but it is brave, important filmmaking of the highest order. It comes from Tom Topor, the screenwriter of "Nuts," who got the idea from

covering rape cases for the New York Daily News. In this sense, "The Accused" is not the reconstruction of the Massachusetts gang-rape (which, unbelievably, sounds even worse than the film version), but came from a desire to write about the subject. To be that close to rape every day at work, even as a mere reporter, must be demoralizing in the extreme.

Topor has expressed this in his script. Just as Sarah is abused on the pinball machine, so is the audience assailed by the film. It grabs us by the throat to silence us, and it won't let go. I would advise, as calmly as I can, and with a minimum of pretension, that every male on campus see this film.

This film ends tonight in Chapel Hill.

WXYC TOP 20

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|-------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. They Might Be Giants | Lincoln |
| 2. Various Artists | Stay Awake |
| 3. Screaming Trees | Invisible Lantern |
| 4. Big Dipper | Craps |
| 5. That Petrol Emotion | End of the Millennium |
| | Psychosis Blues |
| 6. King Missile | They |
| 7. Voice of the Beehive | Let it Bee |
| 8. Sonic Youth | Daydream Nation |
| 9. Los Lobos | La Pistola y El Corazon |
| 10. The Popes | Hi, We're the Popes |
| 11. R.E.M. | Green |
| 12. Scruffy the Cat | Moons of Jupiter |
| 13. Waxing Poetics | Manakin Moon |
| 14. Mission of Burma | Forget |
| 15. Balancing Act | Curtains |
| 16. U2 | Rattle and Hum |
| 17. Lime Spiders | Volatile |
| 18. Richard Thompson | Amnesia |
| 19. Steve Earle | Copperhead Road |
| 20. Game Theory | Two Steps from the Middle Ages |

But "The Good Mother" is a much different film. There is genuine emotion at stake here, and Nimoy doesn't know how to evoke the necessary sentiments from his audience. He fails to capture the subtle nuances of human nature, using cliched substitutes instead. He gives everything an unnatural amount of significance and makes the characters seem horribly predictable. Worst of all, by showing the elements of the story so blatantly, he destroys the voyeuristic relationship between the audience and the characters. It is as if the audience is the jury watching while the Good Mother shows them what a good mother she is. She may as well wear a tag around her neck declaring her righteousness.

The other major problem is the miscasting of Diane Keaton. In Woody Allen's "Annie Hall" and "Manhattan," she demonstrated a unique comic talent that moved her into a select group of great American actresses. In dramatic roles, however, she always seems uncomfortably out of her depth.

She has moments of unexpected intensity in this film that become quite moving because they transcend the rest of her performance. She tries very hard, but her innate nervousness and subdued daffiness detract from the credibility of her character.

Nevertheless, "The Good Mother" is an admirable film that many people who are closer to its subject matter will find more moving than I did. In its favor, the defiance of the ending deserves credit, as does the inspired use of Sinead O'Connor's "Just Like You Said It Would Be" as the love theme to the film. Both go against the grain of standard Hollywood filmmaking, and give the film a more realistic setting.

But these positive points can not hide the faults. Ultimately, the film fails because it lacks the substance to deal with its sensitive subject matter. It tries so hard to prove itself worthy that it remains sadly empty at the core.