

The best films of 1988: A return of movies for intelligent audiences

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Looking back, as one often does in reviews, this year has been a good one for films. The studios jumped to the astute realization that people over the age of 16 do enjoy going to the movies. Consequently most of the more successful movies required at least a triple digit IQ — not the case in the early and mid '80s.

They saw, perhaps no longer to their dismay, that old formulae do not always do the trick. Stallone's latest display of narcissism, "Rambo III," got the thumbs down, as did Michael J. Fox in "Bright Lights, Big City." Granted "Crocodile Dundee II" and Eddie Murphy's "Coming to America" did roll in the bucks, but at least they resorted to humor rather than violence for their appeal. Even George Lucas — after a few horrible years — found moderate success with the annoying, but well-meaning "Willow."

There was an extremely pleasant feeling that if a film really contained a genuine sense of integrity it stood a chance, however small or strange it was. John Waters' delightful "Hairspray," while not quite living up to the dubious Waters reputation, came as a wonderfully refreshing surprise early in the year. The more erratic, but equally energetic "School Daze" marked a welcome return to the screen for one of America's most talented directors, Spike Lee. John Sayles' "Eight Men Out," showed once again the skill and precision of a shamefully underrated filmmaker and was right up there with the very best of them.

Even the comedies, Hollywood's



The entire ensemble of the musical, "Forty Acres and a Mule," as seen in Spike Lee's "School Daze."

mainstay genre, demonstrated more than usual depth and humor, echoing the wit of some of the great Hollywood comedy classics of the early years. Martin Brest's "Midnight Run" owed its considerable charm to the excellent performances of Robert DeNiro and Charles Grodin, both of whom were so good in their parts that they made it seem like the movie would have failed miserably without them. Ron Shelton's "Bull Durham" proved itself worthy at the expense of the citizens of a town not a million miles from here. Again, the three leads, Kevin Costner, Susan Sarandon, and Tim

Robbins, pulled the narrative above the usual level of slapstick to give real character to the slightly thin story. Jonathan Demme's messy, but still rather fun "Married to the Mob" also provided evidence that Hollywood was prepared to invest in adult-oriented comedy.

The recent spight of horror films continued unheeded, usually in the form of sequels — A Nightmare on Elm Street IV and Hellraiser II to name but two — which generally were far less memorable than their not really very memorable at all prequels. The most interesting offering came in the

form of David Cronenberg's "Dead Ringers." The film marked a distinct break from the cruder form of horror at which Cronenberg excelled. But despite disturbing critical acclaim and a creditable performance from Jeremy Irons, "Dead Ringers" was simply too introverted for its own good.

With a few exceptions, foreign films did not distinguish themselves, as they have done in previous years in spite of the absence of great foreign directors. Most notably, France had nothing to pat itself on the back about, but Germany did. Wim Wenders' "Wings of Desire" showed Wenders at his most poetic. While the film

was not the masterpiece it wanted to be, it had a lingering quality similar to some of the great European films. The star of the year, however, was unquestionably a young Spanish director called Pedro Almodovar, who created a new style of humor with the outrageously black "Matador," and with the tamer and more commercial "Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown," which broke house records when it opened in New York. Though Almodovar is, as they say, not for all tastes, he is certainly an exciting prospect for some.

One film stands out as the sleeper of the year, meaning that it made bags of money when it wasn't expected to, confounding those in Hollywood who thought that they knew what the masses wanted. Written by Monty Python favorite John Cleese and directed in the style of the old British comedies of the '40s and '50s by veteran director Charles Crichton, "A Fish Called Wanda" became a more or less instant success with its deceptively simple story and supremely confident Anglo-American cast.

Cinema maintained a high profile in the media as well, by inciting more than its usual amount of controversy. Most of this was centered on one film, Martin Scorsese's "The Last Temptation of Christ." In the major cities, the film was inundated with protestors, who believed the film to be blasphemous in its depiction of Christ. "The Accused" provided a gruesome picture of a rape with a ten-minute sequence as horrific in its realism as anything that has ever been seen on the screen. At the year's end, "Mississippi Burning"

also caused a media storm, this time, for its relentless portrayal of the civil rights disturbances in the South during the '60s.

When the Oscars come around, there will be no "The Last Emperor." The field is open. Of the men's performances, it has been a good year for Tom Hanks with "Punchline" and "Big" (which, incidentally, is the most successful film ever to be directed by a woman), William Hurt (so what's new) with his superbly controlled portrait of a withdrawn tour book writer in Lawrence Kasdan's otherwise disappointing "The Accidental Tourist," Dustin Hoffman with "Rain Man," Willem Dafoe with "The Last Temptation of Christ," and Forest Whitaker, who, in my opinion, outshone them all with his powerful and moving portrayal of Charlie Parker in "Bird."

Of the women, three performances stood out. Sigourney Weaver roared through "Gorillas in the Mist" with such genuine power that she elevated herself to the level of Meryl Streep in the realms of method acting. By coincidence, Streep herself put out another impeccable performance, this time slipping into an Australian accent, in "A Cry in the Dark." Lastly, Jodie Foster bounced back with a vengeance from her flagging career as the rape victim in "The Accused."

Of the films, a handful surpass the rest with their sheer quality. Barry Levinson overcame the problems that have filtered in to his previous works, such as "Tin Men" and "Good Morning, Vietnam," and made "Rain Man" as good a film as it could have been. Fred Schepisi's "A Cry in the Dark" showed the necessary lack of sentimental-



The clean-scrubbed, cherubic cast of Jonathon Demme's adult comedy, "Married to the Mob."

ism to raise it above the normal 'movie with a cause' and give its content a disturbing relevance and impact. Clint Eastwood suggested an unseen smartness, even genius, that he seems to have disguised too well in the past, and from behind the camera created the impeccable and intensely emotive "Bird" like it was no trouble at all.

Finally, there is one film that will be remembered more than any

other this year for the sheer sense of joy and amazement it gave to anyone who saw it. "Who Framed Roger Rabbit?" turned itself into a phenomenon by combining live action and animation to a degree that had never been seen before. And the result was dazzling. Whether it is worthy of comparison to the others in the race for the coveted Oscar is hard to tell. I guess we'll just have to wait and see.

In case you were wondering, my Top Ten are, in alphabetical order:

1. "Bird"
2. "A Cry in the Dark"
3. "Eight Men Out"
4. "Hairspray"
5. "The Last Temptation of Christ"
6. "Matador"
7. "Midnight Run"
8. "Powagqatsi"
9. "Rain Man"
10. "Track 29"



Bob Hoskins and Joanna Cassidy star in the 1988 summer hit, "Who Framed Roger Rabbit?"



Director/writer Ron Shelton and Kevin Costner work out a scene on the set of "Bull Durham."



Forest Whitaker gave a remarkable performance as jazz artist Charlie Parker in Clint Eastwood's "Bird."