

THE ENVELOPE PLEASE ...

Between now and Christmas, 'tis the season to release Oscar wannabes

Ah, November! Ah, the crisp, fresh air of fall! Ah, the sound of leaves falling to the tune of Hollywood's Box Office tills as they ring in that blockbuster money!

Well, not quite. Already some of the surest movie bets of the season have proved to be dismal failures. Big guns do go "pop," even guns that have gone "bang" before. *Johnny Handsome*, the action drama from Walter 48 Hrs Hill made a quick exit. In *Country*, Norman Moonstruck Jewison's Vietnam film starring Bruce Willis, sunk under bad reviews and only managed to scrape an embarrassing \$3 million. *Erik the Viking* has not had the word of mouth it badly needed to take off. *Black Rain* will make over \$40 million, but that figure will scarcely recoup its massive production costs. Even *Fat Man and Little Boy*, the story of nuclear physicist Robert J. Oppenheimer starring Paul Newman and directed by Roland Killing Fields Joffe, has just dropped a well-meaning bomb.

So, what have we been going to see in droves? *sex, lies and videotape* (over \$20 million to date) has been the thinking man's film of the season, with audiences returning to it for a second and third look. *Sea of Love*, Al Pacino's return vehicle, has done remarkably well breaking records in its first week of release and going on to take almost \$50 million to date. But no, the runaway hit of the season thus far is *Look Who's Talking*, which has taken over \$40 million in its first three weeks. Only

RICHARD SMITH film

films with Stetson hats or pointed ears and wings do better than that. Starring Kirstie Alley, John Travolta and the voice of Bruce Willis, *Look Who's Talking* is another baby movie (albeit with a twist) and is arguably the most TV-like film to grace the screen in many a diaper-change. You might as well be at home watching a sitcom.

All of which goes to prove that the tastes of the public at large are impossible to successfully gauge. Even so, this year's record-breaking \$2 billion summer should have taught Hollywood a valuable lesson in variety; make something for everyone, and everyone will come. If you could see through the sequels this summer, almost every taste was catered for - adventure, fantasy, drama, comedy, it was all there (a lot of it was darn good, too). And if the list below is an indication, this Holiday period will continue the trend.

For 'tis the season to release all the Oscar contenders (with a couple sequels and comedies nestled snugly in there for good measure). 1988 proved that the Academy only goes to see movies in December (all of last year's contenders for Best Picture were released in that month) and, looking at the major studio's schedules, it will probably happen again. So pick a winner from this smorgasbord of films that will grace

the nation's screens between now and 1990. Go on, pick.
All dates, *mais oui*, are tentative.

NOVEMBER 3

First out of the gate is Woody Allen. Advance word on the Woodman's projects is notoriously



Sally Field ('You like me!') stars in 'Steel Magnolias'

difficult to come by, but now that it's out, critics the country over have been running out of superlatives to praise the filmmaker for finally making some sense out of his unhealthy Ingmar Bergman fixation and returning in part to what he has always

done best; comedy. *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, which opens at the Varsity tomorrow, stars the amazing lineup of Martin Landau, Angelica Huston, Mia Farrow, Daryl Hannah, Claire Bloom, Sam Waterston, Woody himself and, apparently stealing the show, Alan Alda.

NOVEMBER 13

Continuing the comedy-drama theme, *Dad* stars Ted Danson, Olympia Dukakis and, in a welcome return, Jack Lemmon. The story of a son who comes home to comfort his father after his mother's heart attack is written, produced and directed for the Big Screen by Little Screen god Gary David *Family Ties* Goldberg. It's his cinematic debut. *Dad* costars youngster Ethan Hawke, recently seen in *Dead Poets Society*, and gets a special sneak preview at the Ram Triple this Friday and Saturday.

NOVEMBER 17

Thanksgiving sees the return of what is becoming an annual event: the head-to-head bout between the new Disney animated feature and that of the Don Bluth studio (who have had notable success of late with *An American Tail* and *The Land Before Time*). Bluth used to work at the Disney studios, so the competition could get bitchy.

The Disney feature, its 28th, is *The Little Mermaid*, based on the Hans Christian Anderson story about a mermaid who falls in love with a shipwrecked Prince. Aah. It stars an array of cookie underwater personalities, including a reggae-singing crab named Sebastian (apparently a Caribbean Jimmy Cricket), a seagull named Scuttle, and a villainess modeled on the late, great Divine, a hybrid octopus by the name of Ursula. It's Disney's first fairy tale since *Sleeping Beauty* in 1958, and features seven original songs from Howard Ashman and Alan Menken, the team behind *Little Shop of Horrors*.

Bluth's *All Dogs Go to Heaven* appears slightly more off-beat, and marks a turning point for the pretenders to the Disney throne, since this is their first venture in a while without the backing of producer supremo Steven Spielberg. *All Dogs* is also a musical, and tells of a deceased canine who comes back to life to discover who murdered him. One for the kiddies. It features the voices of Burt Reynolds and Dom DeLuise.

Back in the live-action realm, there are four other potentially enormous Thanksgiving releases. The one most likely to bellyflop is *Steel Magnolias*, the screen version of the acclaimed off-Broadway play by Robery Harling, directed by Herbert Ross (*Pennies from Heaven*). *Magnolias* stars Shirley MacLaine, Sally Field, Daryl Hannah, Olympia Dukakis, Julia Roberts and Dolly Parton as six Southern women who come together

as they cope with birth, death, sex, stuff of that nature. Hearing all those dreadful imitations of Southern accents could make it the least bearable film of the season. It'll be even worse if the Northerners go for it.

More likely to succeed is *Valmont*, director Milos Forman's first film since *Amadeus* in 1984. *Valmont* is another new version of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, also the source material for last year's hit *Dangerous Liaisons*. Far from being a rip-off, Forman's film was into production long before Stephen Frears's version started shooting. The latest adaptation of the story of those naughty French aristocrats stars Meg Tilly and Colin Firth.

There are some guarantees in Hollywood. Who is going to bet that *Harlem Nights*, Eddie Murphy's directorial debut, starring himself and Richard Pryor as father and son, is going to flop? He will have dollars wherever he goes, unless, of course, he's the worst director ever. *Harlem Nights* is the story set in 1938 Harlem of a successful nightclub (run by Murphy and Pryor) and a crooked cop (Danny Aiello) who wants a cut of the profit. Murphy also wrote the screenplay.

NOVEMBER 22

Even way ahead of Eddie will be *Back to the Future, Part II*, the se-



Jack Nicholson acts and directs 'The Two Jakes'

quel that, like most of late, reassembles the entire cast and crew of the first: Spielberg is in the production seat; Zemeckis (*Roger Rabbit*) is in direction; Michael J. Fox and Christopher Lloyd are back in the leads. It's something of an experiment, since they have filmed Parts II and III back to back. (Hollywood's other experiment this fall is the home video release of *Batman* on November 15, just five months after its starting run). *Back to the Future, Part II* will be taking off where the first left off, and Part III will be released next summer. Will we be sick to death of it by then, or will we hardly be able

to wait? If the trailers are any indication, go for the latter.

DECEMBER 8

There's a fair share of comedies to lighten up the heavy December load of Oscar wannabe material. Firstly, *We're No Angels*, directed by Neil Jordan (*Mona Lisa*) and written by David Mamet (*The Untouchables*), stars the unlikely comedy duo of Robert DeNiro and Sean Penn as smalltime crooks who escape from prison and are forced to hide in a New England town disguised as priests.

The War of the Roses looks hot to trot, starring as it does the by-now surefire team of Kathleen Turner, Michael Douglas and Danny DeVito. It's the story of the disenchanted Roses (Turner and Douglas) who, while agreeing on divorce, each refuses to leave their lovely house. DeVito, as well as directing, plays a divorce lawyer, and describes it as a film "about love, passion, divorce and furniture." If the publicity holds up, this'll be a comedy on the black side.

Can anyone take Sylvester Stallone seriously anymore? (*Rocky V* is said to be close to production, which somewhat answers the question). In *Tango and Cash*, previously titled "Set-Up," he co-stars with Kurt Russell. Together they play rival cops who get framed and sent to prison, only to escape and join forces to find the real crooks. Directed by Albert Magnoli (*Purple Rain*).

DECEMBER 15

Spielberg swears that *Indy III* was his last kiddie picture. From now on it's gonna get serious. Always, his latest film starring Richard Dreyfuss (who previously worked with Spielberg on *Close Encounters*) and Holly Hunter, will be our chance to see what he means. Based on the 1944 Spencer Tracy film, *A Guy Named Joe*, *Always* is the story of a firefighting pilot (Dreyfuss) who dies in the line of duty. Does his death separate him from his loved one, Hunter? Ask Audrey Hepburn, she's been cast as... but that would be giving too much away. *Always* co-stars John Goodman and newcomer Brad Johnson.

Blaze has nothing to do with firefighting, but should get just as much attention if its promise to put the tease back into stripping is true. Ron Shelton (*Bull Durham*) writes and directs the true story of 1950s governor Earl K. Long (Paul Newman) and his steamy affair with stripper Blaze Starr (Lolita Davidovich).

At last, Jack Nicholson stops playing at cartoons and gets down to the serious business of *The Two Jakes*, otherwise known as "Chinatown II." Written by the man behind the original, Robert Towne, the second film to feature detective Jake Gittes is a mystery concerning the postwar real

estate boom in Southern California. It's got Oscar written all over it (especially since it's directed by Nicholson himself), and co-stars Meg Tilly, Harvey Keitel, Madeline Stowe and Ruben Blades.

Enemies, a Love Story is set in 1950s New York and stars Ron Silver as a Jewish man romantically involved with three women at the same time. The unfortunate three are Angelica Huston as his first wife (who the man thinks has died in the Holocaust), Margaret Stein as his current wife, and Lena Olin (who last steamed up the screens in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*) as his mistress. Paul Mazursky (*Down and Out in Beverly*



Matthew Broderick ('Ferris Beuller's Day Off') stars in 'Family Business' ...

Hills) directs from his own script. *Enemies* is based on an I. B. Singer story.

DECEMBER 22

Driving Miss Daisy is a race relations comedy-drama adapted from the Pulitzer prize-winning play by Alfred Uhry about the 25-year relationship between a fussy Southern Jew (Jessica Tandy) and her unflappable chauffeur (Morgan Freeman) in the role he made famous off-Broadway). Dan Ackroyd, believe it or not, plays Tandy's son. It's directed by Bruce Beresford.

Glory continues the race relations theme, but as an historical drama, it may be a hard sell. The trailers are trying to make the Civil War epic about the first black fighting regiment in US history look as colorful as possible. In its favor is the slightly mixed bag cast of Matthew Broderick, Cary Elwes (*The Princess Bride*), Denzel Washington (*Cry Freedom*) and the ever-present Morgan Freeman. Slightly dubious, however, is director Ed Zwick, the man behind *About Last Night* and *thirtysomething*.

"What, no tearjerker?" you cry. Prepare to blabber with Bette Midler at the second re-make of *Stella Dallas* (the most famous version was with Barbara Stanwyck in 1937). Here simply titled *Stella*, Midler plays a

headstrong single parent who struggles to be an ideal mother while making sure her daughter gets the life she never had. Pass the kleenex, I'm crying already. From, sniff!, Touchstone Pictures.

CHRISTMAS

And with a quick pause to shake those jingle bells, we're off onto the final five that alone could comprise next spring's list of Best Picture nominees. Firstly, *Family Business*, directed by Sidney Lumet (*Serpico, Dog Day Afternoon*), seems to have it licked. With the stunning cast of Sean Connery, Dustin Hoffman and Matthew Broderick, who is not going to see it? Can there be a single member of the moviegoing public who likes none of the three stars? They play three generations of a family who plan a low-risk, high-return robbery. Expect film acting at its finest. Let's just hope the screenplay holds up.

She-Devil has a similarly wide, if more peculiar, appeal. Pitting Meryl Streep against Roseanne Barr should capture the movie and TV audiences both (the trailers are going for it, even if the movie can't). The *Desperately Seeking Susan* Seidelman-directed comedy is based on an award-winning British TV mini-series. Barr is Ed Begley Jr.'s wife who is dumped in favor of Streep, a romance novelist. Not being one to mope, Barr seeks revenge. The original TV series had an unsettling feel, but this looks like it'll be played for out-and-out comedy. Could be worse. (Besides, after the summer's biggest flop, *Great Balls of Fire*, Orion needn't be afraid.)

Music Box, from the hands of controversial director Costa-Gravas (*Missing*), stars Jessica Lange in the story about a woman attorney who defends her Hungarian father from charges of war crimes. A similarly-difficult task is explaining the gruesome events to her 11-year-old son,



... as does last year's Best Actor, Dustin Hoffman ('Rain Man')



Elizabeth McGovern stars in 'The Handmaid's Tale'

the excellent Lukas Haas (*Witness*). Written by Joe Eszterhas (*Jagged Edge*).

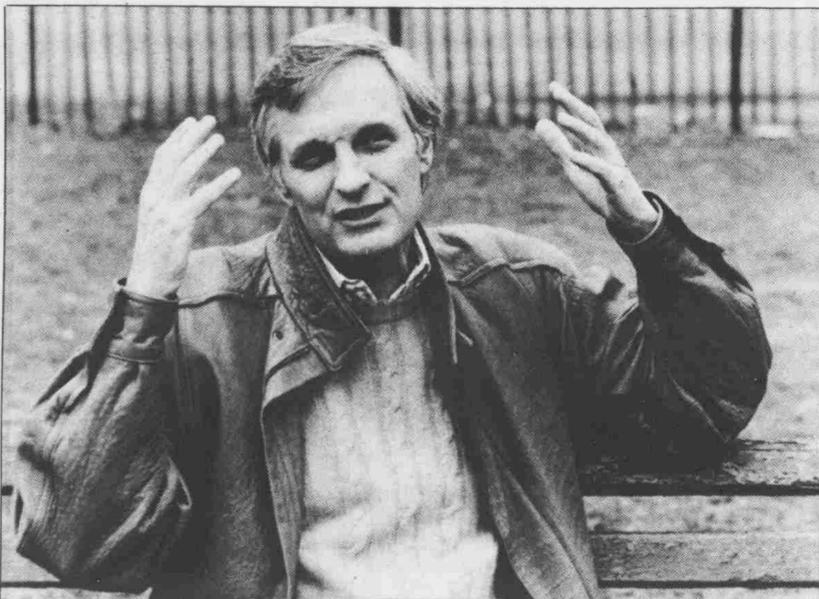
Also in a serious vein, Oliver Stone returns with what he says is the second of a Vietnam trilogy, *Born on the Fourth of July*. Tom Cruise plays Ron Kovic, the young gung-ho soldier who comes home from the war a paraplegic, and becomes a social activist. Willem Dafoe (*Platoon*) also stars. Stone co-wrote the screenplay with Ron Kovic from Kovic's book. Oscars await.

Finally the big Independent film that could throw the whole lot for a loop is *The Handmaid's Tale*, recently filmed in Durham. Based on Margaret Atwood's book, and written for the screen by Harold Pinter, it is a visionary story in which religious fundamentalists have taken power and sexism is institutionalized. Directed by Victor Schlonдорff (*The Tin Drum*) and starring Faye Dunaway, Robert Duvall, Elizabeth McGovern and Natasha Richardson, *The Handmaid's Tale* may be too surreal and unglamorous for the mainstream audience, but it ranks as one of the most interesting of all upcoming films.

And that by no means is the complete list of all the films scheduled for release between now and New Year's: look out too for *The Witches*, a fantasy starring Angelica Huston, featuring some new Jim Henson creations and directed by Nicholas Roeg; *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*, starring Chevy Chase and written by John Hughes; *Stanley and Iris*, starring Jane Fonda and Robert DeNiro in a drama with illiteracy as its theme; *Drugstore Cowboy*, a highly-acclaimed, dark drama

Mia Farrow stars in Woody Allen's 'Crimes and Misdemeanors'

The list goes on, and although it remains uncertain exactly what film will be on everybody's lips come January, what is clear (and quite reassuring given Hollywood's singular ability of climbing on popular bandwagons) is that there is something for everybody in the list above. And that, after all, is exactly as it should be.



Alan Alda steals the show in Woody Allen's latest, 'Crimes and Misdemeanors'