



DTH/Greg Thacker

The box office of the Varsity theater

# Movies...cinema...theatre...whatever The future releases: coming soon to

By **BILLY STOCKARD AND LISA REICHL**

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**T**he leaves are falling. A chill is in the air. We all know what's around the corner — a new batch of holiday treats from Hollywood. Don't be frightened. Has Omni ever let you down? Well, maybe so, but we're here anyway with a handy dandy guide to this season's movies. Plan your holidays accordingly.

### ALICE

Woody Allen directs what he calls "a contemporary comedy about a wife who goes through a remarkable series of experiences at a critical point in her life." Okay, since that's clear .... The woman he's talking about is played by Woody's wife Mia Farrow (does this surprise anyone?). She's joined by two bankable actors: Alec Baldwin and William Hurt. Don't expect much of an advertising campaign; Allen will probably keep this one low-key.

### ALMOST AN ANGEL

Paul Hogan sheds his *Crocodile Dundee* image forever, or so he hopes. Hogan writes, directs and stars in this comedy about a small-time thief who's knocked over the head and becomes convinced he's an angel. Suddenly reformed, he's out to do good deeds,

and once again, Hogan's real-life wife Linda Kozlowski is at his side (is anyone else noticing a husband/wife theme here?). But will the audience accept Hogan minus his Dundee guise?

### AWAKENING

Bring out the Kleenex. Penny Marshall, fresh from her *Big* triumph, directs Robin Williams and Robert De Niro in a story about an encephalitis patient who has been awakened after spending 30 years as a vegetable. Rumor has it that this was a troubled set, including Williams punching De Niro in the nose and Marshall not understanding her Czechoslovakian cinematographer. But the troubles probably won't make it to the tear-jerking final product.

### BONFIRE OF THE VANITIES

Speaking of *Big*, Tom Hanks stars with Melanie Griffith, Morgan Freeman and Bruce Willis in this adaptation of the Tom Wolfe novel. This film, directed by Brian De Palma, tells the story of a Park Avenue bond salesman who gets caught up in racial turmoil in the South Bronx. Do big names mean big money?

### COME SEE THE PARADISE

Inspired by a photograph, Alan Parker (*Mississippi Burning*) directs Dennis Quaid as an man whose Japanese-American wife and daughter are confined to an internment camp during World War II. If they do this

right, it could be Oscar time for Quaid.

### EDWARD SCISSORHANDS

Director Tim Burton (*Beetlejuice* and *Batman*) gives us another offbeat feature starring Johnny Depp, Winona Ryder and Dianne Wiest in a fable about a boy who has scissors for hands. And you thought you had problems. At least he won't have any trouble getting appointments for a haircut. Actually, if *Beetlejuice* was any indication, expect to see some wild special effects, which Ryder should be used to. And Wiest (*Parenthood*, *The Lost Boys*) is always a winner.

### THE GODFATHER, PART III

Francis Ford Coppola reunites Al Pacino, Diane Keaton and Talia Shire, and throws in his own daughter, Sofia Coppola, for this sequel to the *Godfather* series. If there's anyone who hasn't seen the first two movies, Pacino plays Michael Corleone, who has seen two brothers killed, killed one brother himself, walked all over his wife (Keaton) and gotten diabetes in the process. Can we say justice? The real question is, has *The Godfather* theme still got the magic touch?

### GUILTY BY SUSPICION

Robert De Niro is burning the candle at both ends by starring in yet another holiday movie, but there's a catch — his co-star is George Wendt. That's right, *Cheers* fans! Norm is starring with Don Corleone in a seri-

ous movie! What is the world coming to? This combination is the brainchild of writer/director Irwin Winkler. The "guilty" are Hollywood stars ruined by the McCarthy-era blacklists in the 1950s. Winkler cast actual blacklist victims in this effort, including Sam Wanamaker, Joan Scott and Bill Bailey.

### HAVANA

Sydney Pollack (*Out of Africa*) chose Robert Redford over Jack Nicholson in this story of an American in pre-Castro Cuba who falls for a redheaded revolutionary played by Lena Olin. In his first role since *Legal Eagles*, Redford is out to prove he's got the star quality to make it in the '90s, but this one sounds a bit too much like *Old Gringo*, which pretty much bombed at the box office. Smart move.

### HOME ALONE

No, it's not a horror flick. It's a comedy directed by Chris Columbus (*Heartbreak Hotel*) that stars Macaulay Culkin, Joe Pesci and Catherine O'Hara. This one requires unbelievable suspension of disbelief: two parents leave their seven-year-old behind when they go to Europe. We're obviously not talking about the Cleavers, here. But the kid holds his own, setting homemade traps for two burglars who don't think anyone's at home. One definite bright spot: the screenplay is written by John Hughes, who made Molly Ringwald such a star with *Sixteen Candles* and *The Breakfast Club*.

### KINDERGARTEN COP

This Ivan Reitman project could be more aptly named *The Terminator*

*Takes on the Toddlers*. Arnold Schwarzenegger goes undercover as (are you sitting down?) a kindergarten teacher. Don't ask why. We haven't a clue. Guess you can't even trust 5-year-olds. Also joining in this potential gem is actress Linda Hunt, who plays the principal. Wonder if Arnold knows what little scene-stealers children can be. But he's an old hand at acting with immature little people. After all, he worked with Danny DeVito.

### LOOK WHO'S TALKING TOO

Anyone who can't guess what this is a sequel to, please turn the page. Kirstie Alley and John Travolta reprise their roles from *Look Who's Talking*, and this time Bruce Willis is joined in narration by Roseanne Barr and Richard Pryor. Little Mikey has a sister, and God help her, she sounds like Roseanne Barr. It stands to reason that Pryor doesn't play a near-relative, but with writer/director Amy Heckerling, anything's possible.

### MERMAIDS

No, this one's not a sequel to *The Little Mermaid*, but it's a sort of "dramedy." In her first role after winning an Oscar, Cher stars as a divorced mother who drags her daughter Winona Ryder to Massachusetts in pursuit of a shoe salesman played by Bob Hoskins. What does the title mean? Guess you'll have to see the movie to find out.

### MISERY

Finally, the sometimes-gruesome Stephen King novel makes it to theaters, under the direction of Rob

## Varsity: an oasis in a desert of sameness

By **GIGI BRANCH**  
Staff Writer

If you were to rely solely on statistics, you would think that independent theaters are on the verge of extinction.

Just look at the figures: out of 28 theaters in the triangle, only four of this rare breed inhabit the area. While Raleigh can boast the Rialto and Studio I and II, Durham's Carolina theater is temporarily out of service until the owners complete ongoing renovations. Furthermore, much to the public's dismay, budget problems have halted the project for the moment. Chapel Hill also had its Carolina, but its doors, now barred to Hollywood, will reopen to boutiques and shops.

But the situation is not as bleak as it sounds: we've still got the Varsity!

This Franklin Street landmark has been entertaining Chapel Hill with its moving pictures for the last 60 years. The original owner constructed the theater in 1927 (just take a look at the top of the building next time you're on Franklin Street) to give his children the means to put themselves through school. Today the Varsity has become a welcome sight for film fiends with exotic tastes.

During this trying time when chain theaters seem to dictate much of the movie scene, the independent theater is an oasis in a desert of sameness.

Jim Steele, manager and co-owner of the Varsity, doesn't seem too bothered by the powerful cinema lords.

His ties to cinema began with his undergraduate days at UNC. He became involved with the film society that was once active on campus. He also worked for a time at the Carolina in Durham where he learned some of the ropes of the movie business. Steele, obviously a dedicated movie watcher, confesses that he sometimes attends movies on his days off. He even makes it a point to watch certain films over and over again.

When the Varsity theater came up for sale in 1982, Steele joined with two other partners, Dr. Hammond Bennett and Steve Smith, and took the plunge. They completely renovated the theater and, as in so many other theaters of the day, turned the original single screen into a dual-screen theater. To soothe the minds of movie purists, Steele said the present Varsity's screens are each as large as the original was in the old days.

These and other abrupt changes, which have transformed the movie industry, provoke troubling thoughts in the minds of those who cherish the movie experience. How does an independent theater stay afloat in this increasingly homogenized chain-theater world?

Obviously, the product speaks for

itself. The Varsity's film repertory offers a surprisingly diverse choice of foreign, independent, commercial and occasional "beat" cult films. This booking demands work.

"Booking is not easy," admitted Jim, "Knowing what you want is one thing, but getting it is another. It is difficult for an independent theater to get the attention of the large distribution houses."

The bidding process for a film is complicated. North Carolina law follows a non-blind bid policy that requires distribution companies to market only those films already available for screening. While this practice may seem somewhat redundant, it keeps movie companies from collecting profits on unfinished films. Under a blind bid policy, a distribution company can receive bids for films that may not even be completed yet.

"This practice protects the theaters," Steele said.

Theaters submit their bids to the distributors via silent contract. Contracts are confined to certain districts, so that a film is never shown by more than one theater in a particular area at one time.

What forces determine the Varsity's playbill? The decision is made by Steele and his two partners.

"We all three have input on this decision and we rely on several fac-

tors," he said. "While we attend festivals and screenings, quite frankly, we are not able to screen every film. Sometimes we will rely on the reputation of a particular director. *Variety* is also a great informative source for the success of a film in the larger metropolitan areas."

How do they choose the length of a film run? Commercial films often have national release dates. These dates allow for little flexibility in film distribution. Foreign films, on the other hand, are distributed differently.

"Foreign films circulate throughout the country from one theater to another. Due to the limited availability of many of these films, they often take as much as two years to make their circuit around the country," said Steele.

What about the security of independent theaters? Are they in danger of dying out? Although Steele's reaction concerning independent movie theaters was optimistic, he said: "Obviously the video craze has killed certain aspects of moviegoing. For example, people often request the classics. The revival houses which specialized in oldies have definitely been hurt. At one time there were as many as 50 of these theaters in New York City, but at present there are only two.

"Midnight showings are another area that has been hurt by home vid-

eos. Only a few cult films which remain in public demand are still played in theaters. But the theaters themselves are still sought by the public. Furthermore, the video companies base their production of videos on the public's response to a particular film."

Do these complications make film selection more difficult for the Varsity?

"On the whole we choose films that we like to watch," Steele said. "We target an audience much like ourselves."

The Varsity's clientele is a mixture of students, faculty and Research Triangle Park professionals.

"Overall we attract an intellectual crowd, but this doesn't mean that every film attracts the same tastes. The patrons for Almadovar's *Tie Me Up, Tie Me Down* will not necessarily be supporters of a film like *Miller's Crossing*. Then there are certain films which defy classification, like one of the Varsity's longest-running films *The Gods Must Be Crazy*."

With all these transformations occurring in the cinema industry, what is there to say about the public? Steele said he sees an increasing demand for better films.

As long as there are enough of us who enjoy the movie experience of sitting in a dark theater, the smell of popcorn hanging in the air with the large screen pulling us in, theaters will survive.

## Now playing: stickiness

### WHITE PALACE ● 1/2

For months, the world has been waiting to see what sort of film Hollywood would produce under the new NC-17 rating. In what would seem a plan to whet the masses' appetites for mainstream porn, Universal Pictures has created *White Palace*, endowing it with an R rating that is dubious at best.

The question one should ask before seeing this film is, in the face of less restrictive standards, are directors going to present sex in an explicit but artistic manner, something you could enjoy without having to slink into Cinema Blue?

In the case of this film, the answer is a sticky, sweaty no.

Don't get me wrong, there is a great deal of sex. The problem with *White Palace* is that there is little else, and one shouldn't have to pay a whole \$5 to see that kind of film.

The flick revolves around the relationship between a 27-year-old executive named Max and a 43-year-old cashier at a burger joint named Nora. The recently widowed Max (James Spader) has decided that Nora (Susan Sarandon) is the one woman he has met who can fill the space left in his life by his late

wife's death. They struggle to continue their romance despite the ever-present reality that Max's involvement with Nora will mean certain social ruin.

*White Palace* breaks no new theatrical ground. The movie is nothing more than an attempt by Universal Pictures to grab the dollars that initial curiosity about the looming NC-17 rating are sure to generate.

Playing at South Square. For more information call 493-3502.

— Jeff Trussell

### GRAVEYARD SHIFT no blobs

What do you get when you take a Kevin Costner look-alike, a Fred Ward look-alike and a giant, skinless batrat and put them all in a textile mill to battle it out?

Total boredom.

*Graveyard Shift* is the worst movie of the year. The makers of the film have taken a great short story and made a mess. Why does Stephen King allow his work to be butchered like this? There oughta' be a law.

There are too many added elements and one-dimensional characters that hurt the movie and nothing that helps it. If you want to see something exciting related to *Graveyard*