

Acting Proves Not 'Best Thing' for Madonna

By ALLISON ROST
Staff Writer

In Madonna's latest career venture, she tackles the role of a yoga instructor who is accidentally impregnated by her best friend. What a stretch.

The complicating factor in this story is that the friend, played by Rupert Everett, is gay. The trials and tribulations that follow form the plot of "The Next Best Thing."

MOVIE REVIEW

In the beginning of the film, Madonna's Abbie has been ditched by her boyfriend. She commiserates with Everett's Robert about her ticking biological clock, and he pouts about his dysfunctional family.

Then, in a frenzy of drunken passion, Abbie ends up pregnant with Robert's child. How convenient.

First, let me be blunt. Madonna is a bad actress. A very bad actress. In the first half of the film, it doesn't really make a difference, because the subject matter never rises above frothy comedy.

But when Abbie wants to move to New York with her investment banker boyfriend and take their son with her, an emotional custody battle ensues. All of a sudden, this loving earth mother inexplicably turns into a heartless bitch no better than some bimbo on "Jerry Springer." Madonna's attempts to emote fall flat and make no sense.

Her superficial performance only fur-



Rupert Everett and Madonna star as two friends having a baby together in "The Next Best Thing." Madonna's superficial performance destroys the comedy-drama.

ther splits the film into two separate halves: a fun and entertaining beginning, and a depressing middle and end. The result is an incoherent mess.

There are too many characters and subplots that clutter the screen and serve no purpose. The only reason for the existence of a gay friend (Neil Patrick Harris) is to tell Robert that moving in with Abbie is a bad idea.

The saving grace for this movie is the always-entertaining Rupert Everett. The script gives him several opportunities to show off his comedic gifts, and when the subject matter turns serious, he still manages to impress.

It's also refreshing to see the subject of homosexuality discussed and portrayed in a non-stereotypical way. The filmmakers didn't shy away from the

possible controversy - showing Robert as a loving father while at the same time romantically involved.

But this movie was clearly intended as a star vehicle for Madonna, and after this melodramatic mistake, maybe she should just stick to her music.

The Arts & Entertainment Editor can be reached at artsdesk@unc.edu.

Poorly Directed 'Reindeer' Runs Right Into Ground

By JUSTIN WINTERS
Staff Writer

If the newest "Reindeer Games" are any indication, old Rudolph should be glad he wasn't allowed to play them.

These "Games" give you a headache and a half before you are halfway through your popcorn.

Piling a cliched script on contrived plot twists, the latest mesh of action, romance and cheeseball comedy from director John Frankenheimer ("Ronin") ends up suffocating in the end from one of the worst conclusions in recent memory.

MOVIE REVIEW

"Reindeer Games"

All is jolly until a cafeteria knife fight (on Jell-O day no less) leaves his cell-mate dead and Rudy able to impersonate him - with a chance of receiving some hot nookie from his friend's girlfriend/penpal, sizzingly portrayed by Charlize Theron.

The movie slowly evolves into a hard-core tryst between the two young hotties at a local Motel 6. One thought ran through my head: "Maybe there is hope for this flick." But I was wrong.

Then, all hell breaks loose, and Rudy

is forced by Theron's trucker bro (Gary Sinise) to participate in a cheap casino robbery. Suddenly, people are being killed very violently, Santa Claus is being very naughty and Sinise is mugging way too much for the camera.

In retrospect, Affleck should stay away from action flicks for at least a couple of years. His success resides in his everyman quality, which is perfect for movies like "Chasing Amy" or "Good Will Hunting." Theron could star in a 90-minute-long commercial for asparagus and I would buy a ticket. She has a bit of talent as well.

Frankenheimer packs the film with enough unexpected and illogical "hooshas" to keep Ben Stein saying "Huh?" The script, penned by the hot Ehren "Scream 3" Kruger, hopes to be more like the funnier thriller "Wild Things," which prided itself on being so sleazy and self-deprecating that it turned out to be a moving-picture fun ride.

But, alas, Frankenheimer's close-ups of each of his stars and headache-inducing direction ends up comparing more to a "Naked Gun"-style comedy that suddenly decided to be serious.

After counting two crosses, three double-crosses and an ambitious quadruple-cross in the flick, I quickly gave up and raced home to pop a couple of Tylenol.

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White Trash Murder Mystery Provides Nothing but Comedy

By FERRIS MORRISON
Staff Writer

Not every whodunit requires the grace and insight of famed crime-solver Angela Lansbury.

Sometimes all it takes is a portly cop with a penchant for show tunes.

Chief Wyatt Rash, played by Danny DeVito, searches through his small New York town to figure out whom he should charge with "Drowning Mona."

MOVIE REVIEW

"Drowning Mona"

This quirky comedy boasts an all-star cast of Hollywood actors portraying a bundle of dysfunctional citizens.

While the film lacks the depth of "Murder on the Orient Express," its comical look at poor white trash is sure to entertain and possibly remind audi-

ences of their not-so-distant relatives.

The title character, played by Bette Midler, isn't exactly Verplank, N.Y.'s model citizen. In fact, when the citizens of the town find out her car plummeted into the Hudson River, no one seems very upset, even Mona's husband.

The film follows Rash as he questions each suspect. Through flashbacks, we learn that just about everyone in the town had a reason to want Mona dead.

The bizarre characters are what really drives this film. Jamie Lee Curtis obviously has fun portraying Rona, a 33-year-old diner waitress who seduces Mona's husband and son.

Midler only graces the film for a few brief scenes but manages to make the audience truly hate her. Only a dame like Midler can show her mean streak and keep her adoring fans.

Set decorator Karen Agresti cleverly makes each set as tacky as its characters, complete with turquoise upholstered chairs and fake wooden wall panelling.

"Drowning Mona" twists and turns until Rash finally reveals "whodunit." While "Drowning Mona" probably won't be up for an Oscar, it shines as this year's funniest murder mystery.

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'Planet' Provides Laughs, Leaves Questions

By LINDSEY ZUCKERMAN
Staff Writer

"What Planet Are You From?" is a crude yet oddly touching look at the world of difference between women and men. In the film, Garry Shandling is a man on a mission. His mission? To impregnate an Earthling to ensure the universal dominance of his planet.

MOVIE REVIEW

"What Planet Are You From?"

The plan seems simple enough, but Shandling's character, Harold, doesn't understand that wooing a woman takes more than complementing her shoes.

Sleazeball Perry, played by Greg Kinnear, helps Harold find potential mates by taking him to strip clubs and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. Kinnear plays his role with just the right mix of joviality and depravity.

The majority of the film follows the tentative relationship between Harold and recovering party-girl Susan, played by Annette Bening.

"What Planet Are You From?" offers a clever look at the battle of the sexes and takes on an interesting twist when one of the soldiers isn't even human.

The film derives much of its humor

from shock value. With lines like: "Your shoes are quite stylish. May I insert my penis now?" the movie gets laughs from surprise as much as actual humor.

Penile references abound in this film. A running gag throughout the film has Harold's penis making a mechanical whirling noise every time he becomes aroused. These jokes might not be sophisticated, but they do provide the guilty pleasure of low-brow humor.

Although most of the comic scenes provide genuine laughs, some just don't work. Whenever Harold wants to talk to the leader of his planet played by Ben Kingsley, he magically pops into an airplane bathroom.

Although mildly amusing, these scenes don't make much sense. Does Harold actually have to ride out the rest of the flight? Why do sophisticated aliens travel via an airplane toilet?

Shandling hardly looks the part of the intergalactic stud. Rather, his expression is a blend of bemused and constipated. Shandling succeeds, though, because he can deadpan even the most absurd line.

Bening turns in another impressive performance in this film. Although the script lacks the gritty depth that she performs with best, it's a pleasant surprise to watch her in a more playful role.

Susan is strikingly similar to Bening's role in "American Beauty." "What Planet," however, gives Susan gives



Harold (Garry Shandling) makes his first attempt at wooing an Earth woman (Janeane Garofalo) in "What Planet Are You From?"

Bening a chance to revel in the sheer silliness of the character.

"What Planet Are You From?" might not offer intellectual stimulation or emotional depth, but then again neither do many relationships. With the help of a

top-notch cast, the film succeeds by offering a low-brow twist on an old story.

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New Film Flops With Misdirected Focus

By JEREMY HURTZ
Staff Writer

Director Julie Taymor molds Shakespeare's first tragedy, "Titus Andronicus," into a lavish and highly stylized film. "Titus" features fine performances and striking visuals, undermined by a laughable artistic self-indulgence.

MOVIE REVIEW

"Titus"

The play isn't widely considered one of the Bard's best. It's certainly his bloodiest, featuring incest, infanticide,

cannibalism and the forcible removal of heads, hands, etc. Violence and revenge permeate the story. It all plays somewhat like "Seven" in iambic pentameter.

Anthony Hopkins plays the title character, a despicable Roman general who orders a prisoner of war to be brutally slain. The plot revolves around the gory revenge taken by the prisoner's mother (Jessica Lange), and the equally heinous things Titus does to have the last laugh.

Hopkins and Lange give fine performances; Hopkins imbues pivotal scenes with a necessary intensity of emotion. Titus' actions are so extreme we must feel his desperate drive to perform them, or else lose the thin, essential thread of sympathy we have for him.

Taymor packs "Titus" with dazzling images - including some of the most interesting period-bending sets and costumes ever seen on film. But her self-indulgence nearly destroys the picture.

She often abruptly changes tone from serious tragedy to absurdist black com-

edy. This provides a couple of the picture's best juxtapositions, but more often serves to jar the audience out of an emotionally charged state.

Even worse are the surreal nightmare-visions Titus experiences. They're represented by wretched montage clips that play like low-budget music videos.

Taymor de-emphasizes Shakespeare's arc - the restoration of political order - focusing her film's first and final moments on a minor character, Titus' grandson. She inserts the boy as a voyeur, then abruptly begins using him as a character. The change doesn't work.

The boy also performs the film's final action, one which does not appear in the play and is hilariously out of place.

Why someone would choose to pull the rug so sharply out from under what might have been a brilliant motion picture escapes me.

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