

Basketball theme hides poor images in 'family film'

There was a time when a family film meant quality entertainment. "Robin Hood," "National Velvet," "Scaramouche" pleased large and diverse audiences.

These films offered adventure, laughs, bright spirits and even moral principles. The protagonists put others before self, struggled against adversity or fought injustices.

Family films are still being made but they seem to have fallen on hard times. "The Fish That Saved Pittsburgh" (PG) demonstrates the extent of that fall.

On the surface, it's a cheery film appealing to juvenile and family audiences. It has the neon look of a merchandiser's concoction of basketball, disco music and innuendo, strung together by a predominantly black cast that includes several pro-basketball stars (Julius Erving, Meadowlark Lemon, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and others).

Presumably, it is rated PG instead of G because it panders to viewers with a few locker-room expletives and some bumps and grinds from a pair of hookers in the basketball audience.

THE STORY is about a million-dollar bonus baby, Moses Gutierrez (Julius Erving), who hits a severe slump along with the rest of his teammates. Their 12-year-old water carrier, Tyrone (James Bond III), appeals to an astrologer (Stockard Channing) for help, and she bridges them all the way to the NBA playoffs.

There are scores of films worse than this, but they don't masquerade as anything decent. That, ultimately, is what is so objectionable about "The Fish."

At least the audiences who attend vile horror films or mindless karate films get just what they pay for and expect to see. "The Fish..." on the other hand, is insidious. It appears harmless and inconsequential. In reality, it is an insult to all audiences and to blacks particularly.

Consider some of the implications and object lessons to be learned from it. When the old team walks out because of the bonus baby's poor performance, tryouts are held for new players, and they are selected according to their astrological sign.

They must all be Pisces, because Moses is a Pisces and works best with other fish around him. Naturally, the new team is a sensation that slam-dunks its way into the championship playoffs.

THE MORAL is that you can forget about hard work, practice, skill, cooperation. Your performance and success depend upon the stars. Not the ones on the court, but the ones in the sky. In fairness, there is one occasion when the team rallies because of pride. Still, it was the stars that got them to the playoffs.

What does this say about personal effort, and what kind of model does the film's adult lead provide? Well, Moses wheels around town in a Rolls convertible, for one thing. Wonderful message there.

Young black males don't have to be pimps to get out of the ghetto. All they have to do is grow seven-foot-two-inches tall, have excellent coordination and terrific peripheral vision.

Values like these make "The Fish That Saved Pittsburgh" a classic example of its kind. Not a family film, but a commercial product packaged by financially fixated, intellectually inert, morally stunted moviemakers.

'Gin Game' deftly deals with old age

By ETHEL SIMMONS

Review

In the opening scene of "The Gin Game," at the Birmingham Theatre, actor Larry Gates has all the good lines that sum up with irony the tragic aspects of growing old.

As his audience for these views, Phyllis Thaxter, portraying another unwilling resident of the convalescent home, listens with a sympathetic ear.

"The Gin Game," a Pulitzer-Prize-winning play by D.L. Coburn, is presented in an engrossing new production, continuing through mid-December in Birmingham.

The well-constructed, so-called "bittersweet comedy" has a first act that moves gaily along; act two gets down to the gritty-gritty and the characters' own emotional flaws which contribute to their lonely old age.

FONSIA DORSEY (Ms. Thaxter) and Weller Martin (Gates) have person-

alities that are poles apart. In the first scene, each shuffles onto the stage wearing robe and slippers, looking for a bit of comfort or companionship.

Pointing up the problems of the aged, Gates delivers stunning, ironic comments, such as:

"You don't need anything special to qualify for Bentley (the home). Old age is sufficient."

"You do have to go somewhere if you live long enough. Sooner or later you end up here."

He's what would be considered a crumbly old man. She's somewhat straightlaced, a perfectly proper old lady. But at his suggestion of a gin game, they begin an exploratory friendship over cards.

Throughout the drama, 14 card games are played. Gates taps his foot

while he shouts out the numbers of cards being dealt. This is always hilarious and gets a big laugh.

The strength of "The Gin Game" is in its subtle character development. From the start the two seem real, the first act is almost like a card-table conversation overheard by the audience.

WELLER, who considers himself a pretty good card player, is obsessed with the game of gin and winning. Fonsia is accommodating but arouses his ire because she wins, constantly.

His temper soars and explodes. Her good nature is revealed, finally, as sanctimoniousness that hides a vindictive quality. Gates snaps the dialogue and cards; Ms. Thaxter gives him fair battle, challenging his accusations.

The gin game itself falters, is revived, seems always ready to end before Fonsia is talked into playing another (winning) hand.

Despite the fact that the characters open raw wounds, the game goes on, as does life.

Both individuals are humiliated to be on welfare, yet both have sown some seeds that led to this circumstance. Fonsia has given her home to the church, rather than let her son inherit it. Weller lost his health and his business, partly through mismanagement.

Some of the funniest bits in "The Gin Game" concern Weller's anger at the incessant attempts by good-hearted souls to entertain the home's residents, especially with choir singing.

HE ALSO OBJECTS to visitors who treat the residents like simpletons. One guest spoke about him as if he wasn't there. "That nice man amuses himself playing cards."

Weller's hostility shows a spirit that has not been entirely dampened. "I'm still alive, dammit!" he cries.

Some circumstances are not easily resolved. The ending of "The Gin Game," however, is somewhat up in the air. This was the only drawback in an otherwise fine production that bounces skillfully between its cast of two pros.

Nicholas Pennell plays Richard III

Theater

Nicholas Pennell will return to the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor to play the title role in Shakespeare's "Richard III."

The second production of the Guest Artist Series will be performed at the Power Center for the Performing Arts Wednesday, Nov. 28 through Saturday Dec. 1, at 8 p.m. and a matinee performance Sunday, Dec. 2, at 2 p.m.

Pennell has participated in the U-M department of theater and drama's Guest Artist program before as both actor and director. Since 1972 he has been a member of the Stratford Company, where he has played the title roles in "Hamlet," "Pericles" and most recently "Richard III."

Jeffrey Guyton, also a member of the Stratford Company and a U-M

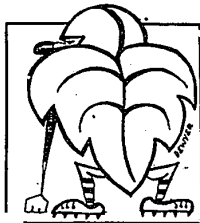
graduate, will do the staging for the battle scenes in "Richard III."

"RICHARD III" is an important play, according to director Richard Burgwin, because "the rise and fall of Richard III and the end of the War of Roses."

Tickets for all performances of "Richard III" are available at the PTP Ticket Office in the Michigan League and at all Hudson's outlets, Monday-Friday, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. and 2-5 p.m. For further information about "Richard III" or other department of theater and drama productions, call 764-0450.

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Remembering The Rose

Bette Midler stars as The Rose, a hard-rock superstar of the late 1960s, in Twentieth Century-Fox's "The Rose." The character is a composite of many female singers of that era. Alan Bates (below) co-stars as Rudge, her hard-driving manager.

