the movies

Dan Greenberg

Take your pick of good, bad

Good, bad and mediocre movies are always available but it is seldom that movies as good as "Short Circuit" (PG) and as mediocre as "Fire with Fire" (PG-13) appear.

The terminal mediocrity with which "Fire with Fire" is afflicted may be overshadowed by some attractive photographic composition, the ever-popular defeat of authority and the characterization of adults as ranging from foolish to downright mean.

If the rude young preview audience that made my screening of "Fire with Fire" more unpleasant than necessary is any indication, the young crowd will squander its megabucks on this nonesense.

Joe Fiske (Craig Sheffer) is an inmate at a boys' honor detention camp. While running through the forest as the object of a sadistic chase-game operated by Honor Camp Boss (Jon Polito), Fiske sees Lisa Taylor (Virginia Madsen) floating in a pond imitating an Impressionist painting. With a cable release she is taking her own picture.

LISA IS A TOP student at the local, exclusive Catholic girls school. (Honest, this is really in the film. I did not make it up.)

If all that doesn't strike a deathblow to your credulity, Lisa sees Joe looking at her for an instant and they fall madly in love. Lisa manipulates events so that the Sisters invite the Honor Detention Camp boys to the school gym for a dance, after which Joe and Lisa get it on pretty heavily, winding up with a big evening of love in a mausoleum at the local cemetary.

I'm not quite sure what Dr. Freud would say, but Dr. Dan sez "Fire with Fire" is ridiculous and mediocre beyond compare.

"Short Circuit," on the other hand, is long on laughs, warmth and humanism and actually has all its circuits in top operating order. It is ironic that while its plot is even more unlikely than the far-fetched "Fire with Fire," "Short Circuit" is so well done that it is extremely credible.

Steve Guttenberg as Dr. Newton Crosby and Ally Sheedy as Stephanie Speck get involved with each other in "Short Circuit." The film's other main character is a robot who comes alive.

Nova Robotics has developed an amazing new robot-weapon. Nova's only marginally slimy president, Howard Marner (Austin Pendleton), is demonstrating five of these machines with his ingratiating smile to an audience of generals, senators and assorted aides.

A THUNDERSTORM interrupts the demonstration and a heavy electrical charge strikes one of the robots, Number Five, upsetting his circuits and giving him the ability to reason independently. "Number Five is alive."

Now, probably some will quibble with that bolt from on high as dramatically simple-minded and reflective of a particular viewpoint about the origin of life. Those quibblers will be left at the gate because the film is so entertaining, you'll be having too much fun to worry about such details or the mundane but unlikely conclusion.

After the storm, Number Five escapes, having developed an inquiring mind. Number Five wants to see the world and get input. The satiric potential is well-realized as Number Five winds up hiding in a snack shop on wheels run by Stephanie Speck (Ally Sheedy). At her home he reads the encyclopedia, a dictionary and watches television endlessly.

Thereafter, in all regards, Number Five has something to say. Whether it's a quote from an old movie or a line from a current commercial, Number Five has just the right, pointed comment to meet every situation.

And the situations do arise, with the industrial-military complex coming in for its share of neat barbs as Nova Robotics tries to, first, recover and later in anger and frustration, destroy, Number Five.

NOVA PRESIDENT Marner battles with Number Five's "creator," computer-whiz Dr. Newton Crosby (Steve Guttenberg), who is first skeptical but later convinced that "Number Five is alive." Marner also has to contend with his Security Chief, Skroeder (G.W. Bailey), a gung-ho militarist who believes the only way to resolve conflict is by destroying the source of contention.

Dr. Crosby sets out after Number Five with the aid of his laboratory colleague and friend, Ben Jabituya (Fisher Stevens), a very funny amalgam of Mahatmas Ghandi, Woody Allen and Peter Sellers' Inspector Clouseau. Stevens turns in a very comic performance as a sex-starved Indian scientist from Bakersfield, although his ancestors originally were from Pittsburgh.

Somewhat predictably, as Stephanie Speck seeks to protect Number Five, she and Dr. Crosby become romantically involved. But that's all right because they, and everyone else in the cast, perform so well in a fine scenario by S.S. Wilson and Brent Maddock.

Even Number Five, a robot designed, engineered and realized by Syd Mead and Eric Allard, gives a warm and very human performance, with voice by Tim Blaney. Number Five is alive, in a sense, with very human movements of his machine parts, particularly the lenses that represent his eyes. He also exhibits human interests and tendencies, so naturally we are going to believe he is alive and one of us.

Number Five is alive, and life is no malfunction. A nice message in a very pleasant, entertaining and, these days you should excuse the expression, wholesome film.

a counting for taste

D. Gustibus

Mexican eatery isn't noteworthy

Your traveling taster visits area eateries and rates them on a 100-point scale. Up to 30 points are awarded for ambiance, which includes general atmosphere and service; 55 points for food, and 15 points for price/value rating. A total count of 59 points or less indicate a restaurant is not recommended; 60-74 points signify from passing to good; 75-89 points designate very good with some extraordinary features, and 90-100 points show that a very special dining experience awaits you.

OLD MEXICO restaurant, 28407 Five Mile, Livonia (421-9681), has a small, rustic dining area with a take-out counter. The decor is not exciting. Both the staff and the patrons are very casually dressed. Unfortunately, our vinyl tablecloth was not really clean, and one of the appetizer serving plates came to the table dirty. The menu does a nice job of explaining the dishes and their ingredients. Dinner took us about 45 minutes. *General Atmosphere — 15 points maximum. Points awarded — 7.*

Service was enthusiastic but not very competent. Appetizer plates were left through dinner and would have stayed with the dinner dishes through dessert if we had not asked that they be cleared. Food came very quickly, sometimes before we were ready for it. At times, however, it was not as hot as it should have been. The check was presented before we could even order dessert. *Service — 15 points maximum. Points awarded — 7.*

The best dish of the meal was our mini botana ($4.50), a mixture of pinto beans, sausage, cheese and vegetables over corn chips. It was a tasty combination. The "mini" portion served three people easily. Also good were the fresh and crisp homemade chips and hot sauce, which was quite spicy. There is no liquor served. *Drinks, Appetizers and Bread — 10 points maximum. Points awarded — 7.*

Although the sauce was hot, the entrees were surprisingly bland. The chimichanga dinner (small, $4.25; large $5.25) was all right. The tortilla was crisp and the guacamole topping good. But neither the beef filling nor the rice had much flavor. The vegetarian combo ($4.65) featured three dishes that were also mild: a burrito, an enchilada and a tostado, each with cheese and vegetables. None of them was especially noteworthy. The burrito beef dinner ($4.40) had large chunks of beef but, again, it needed more seasoning. *Entree, Vegetables and Garnishes — 35 points maximum. Points awarded — 25.*

The cinnamon crisp ($1.30), a homemade tortilla, cooked with sugar and cinnamon, was really delicious. The Mexican cookies (3 for $1.04) did not seem particularly Mexican. They were a little dry but enjoyable nonetheless. *Dessert and Coffee — 10 points maximum. Points awarded — 8.*

Dinner cost about $18 per couple, with tip but without drinks. While some of the dishes were good, too many did not have any special oomph, and the problems with the service and atmosphere detract from the meal. *Price/Value — 15 points maximum. Points awarded — 10.*

A Counting for Taste — 100 points maximum. Total points awarded: 64. Although the food at Old Mexico is adequate, this restaurant lacks any special appeal.

D. Gustibus welcomes your reactions, comments and suggestions of favorite restaurants in the Observer & Eccentric communities. Write to D. Gustibus, in care of Observer & Eccentric, Entertainment Department, P.O. Box 3503, Birmingham 48012.

upcoming
things to do

BEAR RALLY

Detroit Zoological Park's fourth annual Teddy Bear Rally will be Saturday, May 17, in Royal Oak. Admission is free for children 5-12 who bring a teddy bear and are accompanied by an adult. Starting at 2 p.m. teddy bear contests will be held, with prizes and ribbons awarded. Bear lovers will be able to observe a live polar bear feeding at 2:30 p.m. The zoo is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

COUNTRY WINNERS

Detroit-area band Hot Grass won the recent Marlboro Country Music Talent Roundup Finals at the High Kicker Saloon in Pontiac. First prize was $5,000. Second-place winner was Branded ($1,000) and third place went to Kickin' Country ($500).

PRINCE STREET

Prince Street Players will present the musical "A Pocketful of Rhymes" for Detroit Youtheatre's season finale. Performances of the musical will be at 7 p.m. Wednesday, May 14; at 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. Saturdays, May 17 and 24, and 2 p.m. Sunday, May 18, at the Detroit Institute of Arts auditorium. Tickets are $5 for the Wednesday evening Friends of Detroit Youtheatre benefit, $3.50 each for the Saturday or Sunday playdates. For more information, call 832-0730 during regular business hours.

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