

Entertainment

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Serious themes, powerful films

'Dancin'' moves along after a slow beginning

Films seem to premiere in related groups. Several weeks ago this column discussed "She's Gotta Have It" and "Good to Go." "Round Midnight" opens Friday, Oct. 17. Those three films (all R) are about blacks and, what is most unusual, from the black perspective.

Last week I recommended, in the highest terms, "Children of a Lesser God" (R), as the movie of the year. It is about hearing impairment and the barriers to human communication that deafness causes. This week there are two more "impairment" films worth discussing: "The Boy Who Could Fly" (PG), about an autistic child, and "Night Mother" (PG-13) about a suicidal epileptic.

It is remarkable, indeed, how much emotional enrichment and good entertainment those subjects can provide.

"The Boy Who Could Fly" (PG) has been playing successfully at a number of theaters since Friday, Sept. 28.

Charlene Michaelson (Bonnie Bedelia) and her daughter, Milly (Lucy Deakins), and son, Louis (Fred Savage), move into a new neighborhood after father Michaelson (Dwight Koss) commits suicide when he learns he has cancer. The Michaelsons are grief-stricken as they try to rebuild their lives.

NEXT DOOR lives alcoholic Hugo (Fred Gwynne) and his autistic nephew, Eric (Jay Underwood), who thinks he can fly. He's often on the roof or in his second-story window peering and looking ready to take off. He's been that way ever since his parents were killed in an airplane crash.

The psychological stimulus for such autistic behavior, and the credibility of the film, is questionable. Perhaps the script was written by Walt Disney and Sigmund Freud, an unlikely team.

There are good performances by all three principals in the Michaelson family, and Fred Gwynne, the drunken uncle, is excellent, as is Colleen Dewhurst, the high school English teacher, Mrs. Sherman, who takes an interest in Eric.

But the bright and cheery, never-say-die attitude of the production and the unreasonable premise of the script make it hard to believe that the boy can fly. It is doubtful the local government would permit an alcoholic to have custody of an autistic child — and revoke that custody from time to time, usually when the plot needs to shift gears.

In spite of its unrealistic handling of serious psychological impairment, the film is good-spirited and entertaining. Perhaps in the antiseptic Disney world of this film, the boy really can fly. We all need that kind of hope.

"NIGHT MOTHER" is much more realistic and an acting tour de force by two of contemporary film's leading actresses, Sissy Spacek and Ann Bancroft. Because their performances are excellent, the film rises above its incredibly depressing portrayal of two tormented women. Spacek is Jessie Cates, Thelma Cates (Bancroft) divorced, epileptic daughter, who announces, as the film opens, that she is going to commit suicide that evening.

For 95 minutes Thelma pleads, cafoles, questions and demands that her daughter explain her decision — and change it. With equal fervor, Jessie obsessively makes her final arrangements and explains her decision.

Among the film's many remarkable qualities is its cast, numbering only seven, five of whom have brief roles on the front lawn, seen from inside the Cates house. Almost the entire film is interior confrontation, physically and psychologically, played between Spacek and Bancroft inside the house.

"Night Mother" is a very theatrical film, with the tight, enclosed quality one often feels in highly emotional dramas on the legitimate stage when superior performances project a palpable tension throughout the audience.

The motion picture's normal sense of wide-open vistas and its feeling of space are absent. The tight shots and restricted, interior areas in which the actresses move emphasize the narrow dimensions of their lives, particularly their psychological spaces.

JESSE'S EPILEPSY and the problems her seizures caused — to say nothing of Thelma's unhappy mar-

the movies



Dan Greenberg



Sissy Spacek is Jessie, a woman bent on suicide.

own final arrangements, carefully organizing her mother's candy, pills, shopping lists and all the other mundane details of an empty life.

One of the film's enigmas is whether Thelma will miss Jessie because Jessie provides for every detail of Thelma's life, because Thelma feels great guilt for her part in Jessie's unhappy life, because Thelma fears she will be lonely when Jessie commits suicide, or for all these reasons.

The film ends as it began, with a series of still views of the Cates' house. There is a sense of symmetry and rightness. One is left with the feeling that the earth will abide and humanity will continue.

If "Night Mother" does not provide that consolation, it still offers two magnificent performances, well worth the depression they induce.

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Performances of the musical "Dancin'" continue through Sunday, Oct. 28 at the Birmingham Theatre. For ticket information, call the box office, 644-3533.

Bob Fosse's "Dancin'" was conceived as a showcase for the dynamism of the Broadway dancer. The touring company currently playing at the Birmingham Theatre does reach some energetic bursts of razzle-dazzle but it takes a while to get there.

To prepare the audience for this completely plotless musical, the prologue states too much viewing of sentimental musical-comedy plots can be detrimental to one's health. The same can be said of watching dance numbers that are spiritless shuffling — "Recollections of an Old Dancer" — or themeless — "Three in One". Nor does the viewer benefit from localized jokes that aren't funny — "So my girlfriend left me and ran off to live with Coleman Young" — or bungled lighting cues.

This latter problem pervaded Act I at a recent performance but worked itself out later. Mistakes like



Barbara Michals

that give touring companies a bad name and lay a patina of amateurishness on some highly talented dancers.

THERE'S PLENTY of frenetic energy when the cast cuts loose in the two middle sections of "Percussion" and the Benny Goodman "Sing, Sing, Sing" number. Fine ensemble work makes the slower-paced "Dancin' Man" work. The sheer originality of "Fourteen Feet" is winning. Nailing the dancers' shoes to the floor highlights the Fosse trademark of letting the hips, shoulders and hands do it all.

The 17-member cast rotates roles considerably at each performance because of the extreme physical de-

mands of an all-dancing show. Despite the opening announcement of cast changes, it is still very difficult to be sure which dancer is which.

Jim Corli is an obvious standout with a strong stage presence. Each of the others gets an opportunity to shine at some point. Improvisations at the curtain call bring some of the most dazzling virtuosity. While it is still difficult to catch individual names as the dancers are introduced, the audience responds to their individual personalities.

In Gail Benedict's recreation of Bob Fosse's choreography, some numbers have lost pizzazz but plenty remains to please those who appreciate the sheer beauty of body movement.

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