

MOVING PICTURES

'Steel Magnolias' doesn't measure up as a movie

MacLaine's acting is outstanding

"Steel Magnolias" (B-, PG, 110 minutes) is a major albeit unsatisfying motion picture which never quite measures up — nor does it ever fully utilize the potential of its talented cast.

One reason for its inadequacy stems from Robert Harling's scenario based on his play. There, the action took place in Truvy Jones' (Dolly Parton) beauty parlor.

Those sequences remain the best of "Steel Magnolias" as six gals gather to gossip about goings-on in their small, Louisiana town all-the-while Truvy and her assistant, Annelle Dupuy Desoto (Daryl Hannah), work their cosmetic magic.

That tight, interior focus sharply presents these women and their personal, psychological and familial problems.

In Truvy's, we learn about her predicament, Annelle's and the joys and sorrows in the lives of the four best customers — M'Lynn Estontont (Sally Field), her daughter Shelby (Julia), Ouiser Bourdreux (Shirley MacLaine) and Clairee Belcher (Olympia Dukakis).

Once the film leaves Truvy's and tries to visualize the girls' gossip, things get troublesome. Abrupt cutting may be intended to mirror abrupt emotional transitions but it turns out choppy, confusing or strange, most notably when Sally Fields flips from tragic hysteria to silly laughter in the cemetery. That may be the way the real world works but this is the movies, folks. Films have to "seem" rather than "be" real.

ANOTHER PROBLEM is how their men are presented. It's one thing to talk about them, another to have them characterized by actors. As it turns out, all the men are one-dimensional figures who detract rather than add to the film.

It's never clear why Truvy's husband, Spud (Sam Shepard), is such a languid, unmotivated fly-about nor why M'Lynn's Drum (Tom Skerritt) is such a grinning fool, Jackson (Dylan McDermott), Shelby's husband, is a mere shadow of a human being.

While this is a woman's movie that properly minimizes male roles, it is so overdone that when these male characters are called upon to do something, their actions are ineffectual.

All six actresses are excellent in their southern accents although it's difficult to hear Olympia Dukakis as anything but an eastern-accented speaker of English. That's how strong her previous performances have been.

Shirley MacLaine, however, is terrific and well worth the trip to your local Bijou but the screenplay doesn't do justice to the talent of the other five actresses.

Clearly, this is a woman's movie where six gals sit around a beauty parlor and gab. Ultimately, that gossip quality undermines the impact of the great courage and human spirit the film intends to celebrate.

The holiday season is just around the corner and three new films for children of all ages have just opened — United Artists' "All Dogs Go To Heaven," Disney's "The Little Mermaid" and Orion's "Prancer."

The first two are animated while "Prancer" (G) has real live actors and actresses telling the delightful tale of Jessica Rigg (Rebecca Harrell), a 9-year-old who finds an injured reindeer just before Christmas.

JESSICA REALIZES it is Prancer whom she intends to nurse back to health in time to return him to Santa on Christmas Eve. Sam Elliott is her



Clairee Belcher (Olympia Dukakis), the grande dame of Chinquapin, and Ouiser Bourdreux (Shirley MacLaine), the town curmudgeon, are fast friends in "Steel Magnolias."



the movies

Dan Greenberg

widowed father while Cloris Leachman and Abe Vigoda also are featured.

"All Dogs Go To Heaven" (B+, G, 90 minutes) features the voices of Lonnie Anderson, Dom DeLuise, Charles Nelson Reilly and Burt Reynolds, among others.

In animation, Charlie the German Shepherd and Itchy the Dachshund break out of the city dog pound and trek back to their old haunts in the Louisiana Bayou. Too late they discover that their friend, Carface the Bulldog, framed them and sent them to the pound in the first place.

This time Carface sends Charlie to dog heaven but Charlie returns for revenge and discovers a unique little girl, Anne-Marie, who can talk to animals. The chase is on and it's sweet, exciting fun which all the kids will love. (Reviewed by Kathy Guyor)

Walt Disney's "The Little Mermaid" (A, G, 80 minutes) is taken from a Hans Christian Andersen tale, the story of a lovely mermaid, Ariel, who falls in love with a human prince, Eric.

But King Triton, her father, is against such a love affair so the wicked sea witch, Ursula, administers a magic potion which turns Ariel into a human for three days so she can win Prince Eric's love.

ALTHOUGH IT'S not that simple,

Disney Studios does it again in its very best style with glorious colors, seven new songs and the voices of a host of Hollywood veterans. A charming and terrific entertainment choice for all the family during the holiday season. (Reviewed by Kathy Guyor)

"Harlem Nights" (D, R, 110 minutes) has comics Richard Pryor, Eddie Murphy, Redd Foxx, Arsenio Hall and Della Reese — in a very funny portrait of the madame in the 1938 Harlem after-hours club, run by Pryor and Murphy.

"Harlem Nights" has lots of snifty ludeuses for Pryor and Murphy to wear. "Harlem Nights" has lots of neat old cars for them to drive. But that's about all this slow-paced gangster film has going for it.

It continually switches from silly comedy to serious gangster stuff and that just doesn't work. Too bad that talent is wasted in a weak script marred by soft directing.

STILL PLAYING:

"Batman" (C+, (PG-13) 120 minutes.

Michael Keaton is a dud in the title role but Jack Nicholson's Joker is terrific.

"The Bear" (D-) (R) 120 minutes.

Excellent nature photography but film often lacks continuity and gets pretty sappy at times.

"Best of the Best" (*) (PG-13)

Another karate chop to your sensibilities.

"Black Rain" (D-) (R) 120 minutes.

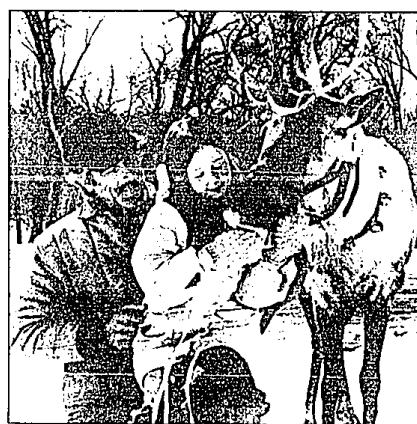
Unpleasant, trite detective story stars Michael Douglas.

"Bloodfist" (*) (R).

Another martial arts movie.

"Communion" (*) (R).

Whitley Strieber's tale of being grabbed by aliens.



Sam Elliott plays John Riggs and Rebecca Harrell is his daughter Jessica in "Prancer."

"Crimes and Misdemeanors" (A+) (PG-13) 100 minutes.

Woody Allen at his best in this romantic comedy about family life with all its joy and sadness.

"Erik the Viking" (*) (PG-13) 104 minutes.

John Cleese, Terry Jones, Mickey Rooney and Eartha Kitt in a tongue-in-cheek tale of the good ole days.

"The Fabulous Baker Boys" (R).

Two brothers — Jeff and Beau Bridges — add Michelle Pfeiffer to

About as unpleasant as it gets.

Four young folks steal and use drugs.

"Erik the Viking" (*) (PG-13) 104 minutes.

John Cleese, Terry Jones, Mickey Rooney and Eartha Kitt in a tongue-in-cheek tale of the good ole days.

"The Fabulous Baker Boys" (R).

Two brothers — Jeff and Beau Bridges — add Michelle Pfeiffer to

Grading the movies

A+	Top marks - sure to please
A	Close behind - excellent
A-	Still in running for top honors
B+	Pretty good stuff, not perfect
B	Good
B-	Good but notable deficiencies
C+	Just a cut above average
C	Mediocre
C-	Not so hot and slipping fast
D+	The very best of the poor stuff
D	Poor
D-	It doesn't get much worse
F	Truly awful
Z	Reserved for the colossally bad
*	No advanced screening

their cocktail lounge piano playing act.

"Gross Anatomy" (C-) (PG-13) 105 minutes.

Bland, slow, weakly structured romantic comedy about five, first-year med students.

"Honey, I Shrunk the Kids" (B+) (PG) 105 minutes.

It's fun, but it ain't easy to be small.

"Immediate Family" (B+) (PG-13) 95 minutes.

Childless couple adopting baby from young mother and her boyfriend who love, but cannot afford, the baby.

"Limit Up" (D) (PG-13) 89 minutes.

Selling one's soul in the commodities futures market.

"Look Who's Talking" (C+) (PG-13) 97 minutes.

Contrived, poorly structured story of pregnant CPA (Kirstie Alley) and her search for a perfect father for her baby. Bruce Willis is the baby's voice.

"Old Gringo" (*) (R) 120 minutes.

Two Americans, Jane Fonda and Gregory Peck, interfering with Pancho Villa's Mexican revolution.

"Parenthood" (A-) (R) 120 minutes.

Large, talented cast in complex but entertaining story about a family that includes Jason Robards, Steve Martin, Tom Hulse, Martha Plimpton and Diane West, among others.

"Phantom of the Opera" (*) (R).

Freddy (Robert Englund) is back newly disguised in an old story.

"Sea of Love" (C) (R) 110 minutes.

Al Pacino as a burned-out detective adds nothing to the cliché nor does a very weak script.

"Second Sight" (*) (PG).

Detective with psychic and partner save kidnapped cardinal.

"Sex, Lies, and Videotape" (R).

Everyone's talking about this romantic comedy with James Spader.

"Shirley Valentine" (A+) (R) 110 minutes.

Superb, comic, romantic, lovely statement about human worth.

"Sucker" (R) 107 minutes.

Wes Craven does it again, this time in the world of electronic video mayhem.

"Staying Together" (A) (R) 95 minutes.

Warm, sensitive tale of three sons on their own when dad sells the family business.

"Stepfather 2" (*) (R).

And you all thought Halloween was last month.

"When Harry Met Sally" (A+) (R) 90 minutes.

Fine comic, romantic story of an unlikely couple — Billy Crystal and Meg Ryan — and well directed by Bob Feiner.

ALTERNATIVE VIEWING



Charlotte Gainsbourg is Janine Costang in "The Little Thief," directed by Claude Miller.

'Little Thief' reflects Truffaut

By John Monaghan
special writer

Last weekend, the Detroit Film Theatre screened "The 400 Blows" (1959), Francois Truffaut's first feature about a boy on the run in Paris. The director — hoping to bring his career full circle — was working on a companion piece to that film before his untimely death in 1984.

"The Little Thief," playing this weekend at the DFT, is based on that final screenplay and directed by longtime Truffaut collaborator Claude Miller. It's the closest thing to a new Truffaut film that we're ever likely to see.

"The Little Thief" is Janine, a 16-year-old petty thief and shoplifter

'The Little Thief' reflects the sensibilities of Truffaut's work, especially in it non-moralizing tone and ability to get into a young person's head.

living in Paris in the 1950s. She swipes objects that fuel her romantic fantasies — silk stockings, milk stoles, perfume, high heels.

She can't actually wear these things out, but does don the heels for constant trips to the movies.

When Janine is caught with her hand in the church collection box,

she flees town, has a short engagement as a housekeeper, then becomes the mistress of a 43-year-old man. However, she grows much more attracted to a swarthy boy who shares her thieving ways.

"The Little Thief" reflects the sensibilities of Truffaut's work, especially in its non-moralizing tone and ability to get into a young person's

head. Yet, Miller has his own unique qualities, making this more than just a tribute.

As Janine, Charlotte Gainsbourg (daughter of actress Jane Birkin) continues in the fashion of young, precocious starlets so popular in French films. The success of "The Little Thief" in France, especially among teenage audiences, speaks more of Gainsbourg than the late director.

Janine still stands after her own mistakes and the blows society has dealt her. Her fate, as in "The 400 Blows," is more or less ambiguous. But, as written, Truffaut has given Janine a little more hope than her spiritual brother.