

'Eleni' thrives on suspense



tickets please
John Monaghan

Trashy thriller is worthwhile

By John Monaghan
staff writer

"Defenseless" is one of those films that could easily get overlooked among the end-of-the-summer leftovers. And it would be too bad, because this trashy little thriller moves an audience through its twists and turns with just enough style. It also provides Barbara Hershey with her most rewarding role in years as T.K. Andrews, an attorney who gets much too close to her latest case. The victim, it turns out, was not only her client and lover, but also coincidentally the husband of her college roommate.

Overly melodramatic and hokey? You bet. But this low-budget thriller (made by New Visions Pictures and distributed by New Line and Seven Arts) delivers on suspense while scriptwriter James Hicks serves up quirky characters you don't find in your typical Hollywood thriller.

T.K., as it turns out, leads a pretty cluttered life. Her office is piled high with lawbooks, case files and the occasional half-eaten chicken sandwich. Instead of a Franklin Planner, she writes notes and phone numbers on little scraps of paper. She keeps meaning to repaint her old convertible, but never seems to find the time. Her love life isn't much cleaner. She consistently falls for the wrong guys and this time picks a doozy when she both defends and sleeps with Stephen Seldes, a successful businessman who rented a warehouse building to a pornographic

movie studio which employed minors.

THE FATHER of a 14-year-old starlet flips out and starts stalking all the principals in the case. He bloodies sleazy director Jack Hammer and lops off the principal asset of porno actor Bull Dozer. He apparently got carried away by stabbing Seldes 18 times. "Defenseless" begins with a clever twist. Instead of the usual opening credits, we watch the first shots of "Ball Busters," the Jack Hammer production about a cheerleader who will do anything to win the big game. For a moment you think you're in the wrong theater.

From here director Martin Campbell employs a pretty straightforward visual style that occasionally falls into the shadowy domain of film noir. When he does toss in a tricky shot, like mouse-eye-view closeups following high heels or characters silhouetted by strong backlighting, it works as a pleasant surprise.

Meanwhile, there's a great study by Mary Beth Hurt as Seldes' wife, a Southern belle who has kept her irritatingly sunny disposition ever since college. T.K. has always been a little suspicious. "If anyone was that happy, they'd die of hypoglycemia," she says.

Sam Shepard, the playwright and sometimes actor, doesn't have much to do as the investigating officer.

In her small rural Greek village, Eleni Gatzoyiannis had been raised according to tradition. She was to be obedient and to know her place. For probably the first time in her life, Eleni says a resounding no when Greek communists terrorize her village in 1948 and demand that the mothers give up their children for the party.

Before the Greek civil war ended in 1949, 28,000 Greek children had been taken from their families and shipped off for indoctrination in communist countries like Albania. One of the children who escaped the relocation was Eleni's son and New York Times reporter, Nick Gage, whose book is the basis for "Eleni," a 1985 Peter Yates film.

Raised in America since he was 9, the adult Gage has become increasingly obsessed with the torture and murder of his mother as the 30-year statute of limitations allowed under Greek law is about to run out. Well played by John Malkovich, Gage keeps a handgun in his desk drawer and waits for a transfer to become bureau chief in Athens. He clearly has his own agenda for re-



pass the popcorn
LeAnne Rogers

turning to Greece and wanting to locate surviving participants from the civil war.

ELENI'S STORY is told through flashbacks of Gage's memories of his mother and accounts he is able to piece together through his own investigations. Gage doesn't even respond to small talk from a boyhood friend he connects with in Athens. He just keeps pushing for information about Eleni.

Played by Kate Nelligan, Eleni is a sturdy, unglamorous woman who has been keeping her family together without the help of her husband, who has been building the family fortune in America for nearly a decade.

Eleni's world is a place where

firewood is gathered, goats are herded, and life is quiet. It will just a matter of time before her husband gets enough money and a home to bring his family to join him.

One of the ironies about Eleni's situation is that she was totally non-political. Early on she helps a local communist running from the monarchist soldiers. That same man later returns with the communist troops to force her family from their home, take all their food and put the local residents into forced labor details laying mines.

Eleni didn't know or care about politics. All she cared about was keeping her family together and from starving, at one point stealing the feedbag from a soldier's horse

for the oats.

LINDA HUNT is very good as a local woman whose communist sympathies don't help her when her maternal instincts run contrary to the communist party goals. After failing to get the appropriate patriotic response to their call for volunteer children, the party man tries to bribe the starving children with fresh bread.

Malkovich's Gage is a man haunted by the last glimpse he had of his mother as she was marched away on a work detail. After they had said their good-byes, Eleni senses the boy is still watching and turns just before she is out of sight for a final wave. It's that small boy that Gage remembers and helps fuel his rage that by simply surviving long enough, his mother's killers become innocent men.

For a film in which a large part of the conclusion is known at the outset, "Eleni" still manages to provide a good deal of suspense. It's the tension of filling in the outline of what we know with what is revealed in layers.

SCREEN SCENE

DETROIT FILM THEATRE, Detroit Institute of Arts, 5200 Woodward, Detroit. Call 832-2730 for more information. (\$5)

"My Father's Glory" (France - 1990). 7, 9:30 p.m. Sept. 6-7; 1, 4, 7 p.m. Sept. 8. The story of a young boy growing up in the magnificent landscape of Provence is based on the autobiography of writer-director Marcel Pagnol, whose scripts for "Jean de Florette" and "Manon of the Springs" brought him fame long after his death. This is the first of a

two-part story (both directed by Yves Robert) to be continued in "My Mother's Castle" in early October.

LIVONIA MALL, Seven Mile and Middlebelt Roads, Livonia. Call 476-1165 for information. (Free)
"A Star is Born" (USA - 1954). 10 a.m. Sept. 3. Judy Garland's career was reborn with this remake of the classic Hollywood melodrama. A young starlet soars to the top, while her matinee-idol husband (James Mason) hits the skids. The restored

musical classic screens here as part of a month-long tribute to leading ladies.

MAGIC BAG THEATRE CAFE, 22918 Woodward, Ferndale. Call 540-0660 for information. (\$4)
"Silence of the Lambs" (USA - 1991). 8 p.m. Sept. 3. This year's most talked-about thriller hit close to the bone when the Jeffrey Dahmer case surfaced. Jodie Foster plays an FBI trainee who must interview jailed "Hannibal the Cannibal"

Lecter in the hopes that he will help catch a new serial killer. Directed by Jonathan Demme. As part of an eight-week "Twisted Film Series."

MICHIGAN THEATRE, 16301 E. Liberty, Ann Arbor. Call 963-8690 for information. (\$5, \$3.50 students and senior citizens.)
"Superstar: The Life and Times of Andy Warhol" (USA - 1991). 7:15 p.m. Sept. 2. A documentary about the popular Pop Artist.

—John Monaghan

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1. What was the name of the newspaper editor in Grover's Corners?

1. Editor Walsh
2. Editor Webb
3. Editor Wilkes

2. Grover's Corners is a typical small town in the early 1900s. What state is it in?

1. Michigan
2. New Hampshire
3. California

3. In what year was the Stratford Festival's first season?

1. 1953
2. 1900
3. 1985



Andrew Dolha as George Gibbs
and Ann Baggeley as Emily Webb

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WINNERS WILL BE CHOSEN SEPTEMBER 20, 1991

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