

Bad rap tracks 'Posse' to the big screen

BY JOHN MONAGHAN
STAFF WRITER

Some critics branded "The Unforgiven" a revisionist Western because it redefined the basic character of the cowboy hero and villain. Wait'll they get a load of "Posse."

Independent director Mario Van Peebles contends that African-American cowboys and outlaws made up a large percentage of the pioneer population in the West, much more than the history books and movies lead us to believe.

And while it would be great to say that the ambitious "Posse" is a landmark film, it adds up to little more than an excuse for rap singers to pose in Western duds.

Van Peebles the director also stars as Jessie Lee, the black-clad hero who says little and smiles even less. He's out to avenge the murder of his preacher father, lynched by white townspeople for his belief that education is freedom.

With Jessie rides a rag-tag band of outlaws, including gangster Father Time (Big Daddy Kane) and Weezie (Charles Lane). In an appropriate switch, there's a token white posse member played by Stephen Baldwin (yes, Alec has yet another brother.)

MOVIES

Western cliché might seem a bit of an oxymoron, but Van Peebles mines every overused line and camera trick, from horses trotting off into the sunset to deep-focus show-downs in the street. He directs as if his audience has never seen a Western before, which may be true for the young audience the movie is aimed at.

The script does present a message, placing the sensibilities of South Central Los Angeles into the saloons and dusty streets of a traditional Western town. The familiar plot device of greedy land-grabbing railroad speculators now becomes a metaphor for urban gentrification.

"This town may still be standing in a year," Jessie says to the townspeople of Freemanville, a black settlement in the path of the iron horse. "But I guarantee you there won't be a black face in it."

Also at odds are the philosophies of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. Characters who profess turning the other cheek end up either two-faced or dead. "Posse" is first and foremost about kicking butt, especially when it

belongs to an evil white man. The action scenes are lumbering and noisy. The MTV-style camera movement only promotes a headache while the climactic showdown between Jessie Lee and his Custer-like Colonel Graham (Billy Zane) couldn't have turned out more predictably. Handsome Van Peebles does make a striking action hero, the African-American answer to Clint Eastwood's "Man With No Name." His supporting cast, meanwhile, blends independent black film pioneers with rappers and even professional wrestlers.

Pam Grier, who played "Foxy Brown" in the '70s, only gets to fire off a round or two as one of the fed-up townspeople. Melvin Van Peebles (Mario's father and a maverick black director in his own right) plays a wise old guy, a mentor of sorts for Jessie Lee.

Tone Loc, the raspy-voiced rapper of the short-lived megahit "Wild Thing," gets killed off early on. Too bad the same can't be said for Charles Lane, whose bespectacled opportunistic Weezie is just as cloying and irritating as Lane's directorial debut in "Sidewalk Stories."

"Posse" professes historical accuracy, but some of its scenes border on the absurd. The Beasts



Latest effort: Mario Van Peebles, shown above with his cast from "New Jack City," recently released "Posse."

Smith-style saloon singer doesn't pound out some lurid torch number, she warbles like Anita Baker in Dolby Stereo. The dialogue too often sounds like left-over lines from Van Peebles' overrated gangster epic "New Jack City." Forget masterpiece for a

moment. It would be great to simply say that "Posse" is a wild good time. It's not. Each decade someone tries to resurrect the Western genre for modern audiences. Movies like "Young Guns" and now "Posse" make us realize that most good Westerns truly are

history. If you have a comment for John Monaghan, call him at 953-2047, mailbox number 1886, on a touch-tone phone, or write him care of Street Scene, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia 48160.

SCREEN SCENE

A sampling of what's playing at alternative movie theaters across metro Detroit as reviewed by John Monaghan.

DETROIT FILM THEATRE
Detroit Institute of Arts, 5200 Woodward Avenue, Detroit. Call 833-2323 for information. (\$5; \$4 students/eniors)

"The Story of Qiu Ju" (China - 1992). 7:30 p.m. May 21-22; 1, 4, 7 p.m. May 23. When a rural woman's husband is wronged by a neighbor, the wife decides to tackle a sea of bureaucratic red tape in her quest for justice. This latest work from Zhang Yimou, the director of "Raise the Red Lantern" and "Ju Dou," plays two weekends at the DFT.

HENRY FORD CENTENNIAL LIBRARY
13671 Michigan Avenue, Dearborn. Call 943-2330 for information. (Free)

"Captain Kidd" (USA - 1946). 7 p.m. May 17. Charles Laughton plays the title character, whose dilatory to England turns him into a notorious plunderer of the high seas.

MAPLE THEATRE
4135 W. Maple Road, Bloomfield Hills. Call 855-9090 for showtimes. (\$5.75 evenings; \$2.95 twilight)

"Like Water for Chocolate" (Mexico - 1992). A lonely woman puts all her energies into creating unforgettable meals in this blend of fantasy and drama. As with the Danish hit "Babettes Feast," you won't want to catch this on an empty stomach.

"E.C. an From" (USA - 1993). Liam Neeson and Patricia Arquette star in the tragic story of a New England farmer who falls in love with the young woman who's caring for his sick wife. Based on the novel by Edith Wharton.

MICHIGAN THEATRE
603 E. Liberty, Ann Arbor. Call 668-8397 for information and showtimes. (\$5; \$4 students/eniors)

"Mac" (USA - 1993). 7 p.m. May 17 - 18. Three Italian brothers decide to open their own residential-construction business during the post-War housing boom of the 1950s. Actor John Turturro ("Barton Fink," "Do the Right Thing") directed and co-wrote this tribute to his father, a first-generation Italian carpenter who instilled in his son a pride in

craftsmanship that obviously carried over into this moving film.

"El Mariachi" (Mexico SA - 1992). Through May 20. Originally destined for rental in Spanish-language video stores, this amazing new film, shot for a paltry \$7,000, finds a young man, in danger, mistaken for a hitman in a dusty border town. Directed, produced, co-written, and edited by wunderkind Robert Rodriguez.

"Ethan Frome" (USA - 1993). May 19 - 25. See Maple listing above.

"Leolo" (Canada - 1992). May 21 - 27. This disturbing new film from across the border finds a confused boy trying to escape from his eccentric family. We know we're in for weirdness when the boy, convinced that his father was actually a sperm-laden tomato, is the relatively sane one in the bunch.

"Pink Flamingos" (USA - 1972). 11:30 p.m. May 21 - 22. John Waters' typically tasteless mess when the boy, convinced that his father was actually a sperm-laden tomato, is the relatively sane one in the bunch.

"The Right Thing" (USA - 1987). Directed by Spike Lee, this tribute to his father, a first-generation Italian carpenter who instilled in his son a pride in

craftsmanship that obviously carried over into this moving film. — John Monaghan

'Laundrette' shows youth angst

BY LEANNE ROGERS
STAFF WRITER

In south London, where unemployment is high and the dole is the main source of income for many, young people have plenty of time — for congregating in gangs to drink, do a bit of vandalism and vent their spleen at the nearest target, their Pakistani neighbors.

Other than their race, why do these white youths resent the newcomers to their country with such vigor? Many of the Pakistanis have taken over small businesses in alums, hired family members, and made a financial success.

That's part of the tale presented in director Stephen Frears' 1985 film "My Beautiful Laundrette." Played by Gordon Warnecko, Omar is a young Pakistani raised in London, living with his alcoholic father in a flat snuggled up to the train tracks. His father wants Omar to attend college but in the interim gets him lined up with a job working for his uncle, a successful businessman.

The uncle, wonderfully played

VIDEO

by Saeed Jaffrey, isn't an immigrant who waxes fondly about the old days in Pakistan. He sees his native land as a country taken over by religion, where his true vocation — being a businessman — couldn't flourish.

Despite recognizing the mixed feelings the Pakistanis, who once lived under the British Raj, have about England, the uncle has embraced the country as a land of opportunity. Through his various enterprises, the uncle takes care of his extended family as well as his English mistress.

Young Omar is quickly elevated from washing cars at his uncle's parking garage and given control of a seedy laundrette for a nominal rent and half the profits.

Joining Omar in transforming the laundrette is his old school friend and now lawe Johnny, played by Daniel Day Lewis. Omar is motivated and wants to be successful like his uncle.

For Johnny, working at the laundrette is much more — it's survival. He's homeless, squat-

ting in abandoned buildings. Unlike most of his punk compatriots, Johnny tries desperately to distance himself from the dead-end existence he has been leading.

The performances are very good, especially from Lewis and Jaffrey, who really embody the tensions between lower-class white Londoners and the successful immigrants. There are nice scenes between both men and Omar's father, played by Roshan Seth.

Johnny must deal with the pain his racist behavior causes the man who befriended and encouraged him. The two older men, vastly different in their lives, meet again with their bond as brothers.

There is also plenty of humor in the film, including the old country efforts of Jaffrey's wife to get rid of his English mistress.

"My Beautiful Laundrette" is available on tape at local video stores. If you have a question or comment, call Leanne Rogers at 953-2103 or write her at The Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia 48160.

Jes Gru from page 8A

and produced by bassist Tom Nixon's brother John, a graduate of Boston's Berklee College of Music. His credits include a project with William Calhoun, drummer in the rock band Living Colour.

The nine-song CD focuses on the band's ability to write catchy melodies coupled with funky rhythms, Tom Nixon said. It also includes a sweet ballad "How to Say Goodbye" to guitarist's Bryan Horvath's mother Carol Horvath, who died two years ago of cancer.

"I think our sound is slightly different," he added. "Other bands go with a lot of rhythm and a lot of guitar or go the other route like the Cure. We try to combine the two."

"That came with John Nixon's help who canned nearly the entire first version of the album.

"He said 'It's not good enough to be an album.'" Tom Nixon said.

"At first we were like, 'What do you mean this isn't good enough?' Then we had to step back and look at it and say, 'He's right.'"

In response, the group wrote its first song together, the aptly titled "Brotherhood."

"The turning point was 'Brotherhood.' Everything just seemed to mesh. We liked it and said, 'Let's go in that direction,'" Bloniewicz said.

The new direction included taking Bloniewicz off of drums so he could concentrate on his vocals. They replaced him with drummer Heath Moore of West Bloomfield.

The Jes Gru celebrates the release of its CD "Mumbo Jumbo" with a performance on Saturday, May 22, at Club X at the State Theatre, 2115 Woodward, Detroit. Call 961-5450. Other performances include: Friday, May 21, at the State Theatre during the Modern Rock Jam finale (961-5480); Wednesday, May 26, at Club X, Detroit (832-2355); May 28 at the Atwater Spring Fest (645-6686); June 5 at Psyche's Lounge (874-0909); June 9 at The Ritz in Roseville (778-6404); June 24 at Industry, Pontiac (334-1999); and July 10 at Twenty-36, Detroit (961-6471).

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