

MOVIES

# Clever ideas, but 'Clockers' is not one of Lee's best



JOHN MONAGHAN

The movie could have been a '90s-era 'Goodfellas.' But like the mix of piano music and rap that comes

together so noisily near the beginning, it's a collaboration that only occasionally works. Scorese was originally supposed to direct but then backed out to make "Casino" with Robert DeNiro. Lee came on board but didn't like the focus of Price's original novel, so he changed it from a middle-aged police inspector to a young drug dealer, or "clocker," named Strike. Strike can get off the street if he performs a hit on a double croaker. Inexplicably, his brother Vincent takes the rap, leaving

## REVIEW

Harvey Keitel's inspector Rocco to put together the pieces and discuss the truth. Rodney (Delroy Lindo) controls the local drug trade like a modern-day Fagin. Despite his cold bloodedness, he treats his tight-knit drug dealers like a family, insisting that his employees stay off of the stuff they peddle. He even gives them haircuts at the corner store that serves as a front. "What do you see?" he asks his young recruits, hands in front of

them in a circle. "Not black, green." Some clever ideas surface in "Clockers." Flashbacks, filmed in grainy, saturated color, are especially vivid, often showing Vincent at work, a "buffer" between his employers and the gang members who threaten trouble. You can see how it eats away at him. You'll catch the usual Spike Lee touches. Cameras and character moves on dollies while conversations typically turn to whether you have to be a killer to be a great rapper. In the seeming chaos, Lee provides role models from

the mother and policeman who try to separate Strike from the young boy he befriends. "Clockers" grows false when Lee employs the stylized lighting, fumbling focus, and shaky camera from television crime shows. He seems out of his element. Also intact are many of the quirky, eccentric touches that screenwriter Price is known for. So Strike loves Lionel trains, slugs Yoo Hoo-style drink called Moo, and has stomach problems that result in a bloody cough. It's harder to get a handle on Keitel's character, a man driven

to clean the streets but who still throws trash out the window while driving. Some have hailed "Clockers" as Lee's best, but these are usually critics that don't like his films to begin with. For me, a Lee fan, "Clockers" is a stretch that the director misses by nearly a mile. To leave a message for John Monaghan, call 553-2047, mailbox number 1806, on a touch-tone phone, fax him a note at 691-7279, or write him in care of Entertainment, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, 32521 Schoolcraft, Livonia 48150.

## SCREEN SCENE

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

**TALK CINEMA**  
Livonia Civic Center Library Auditorium, 32777 Five Mile Road, begins 7 p.m. Wednesday, Sept. 20. Admission is with a current Friends of the Livonia Library membership card, \$5, available at the door.

"How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying." A wind-up washer churns his way to the top of a major firm in this comedy. This show is now a musical on Broadway. Dr. Frank Ross leads a discussion on the film before and after the showing. Group meets third Wednesday of every month.

**DETROIT FILM THEATRE**  
Detroit Institute of Arts, 6200 Woodward, Detroit. Call (313) 833-2323 for information. (\$5; \$4 students)

"A Pure Formality" (France/Italy - 1994). 7:30 p.m. Sept. 15-17. 7 p.m. Sept. 17. Gerard Depardieu stars in this chilling tale of a man who claims to be a writer picked up as a murder suspect and questioned by an extremely thorough police inspector (Roman Polanski). A different kind of story from Giuseppe Tornatore, the director of "Cinema Paradiso." "Chinatown" (USA - 1974). 7 p.m. Sept. 18. A brand new print of Roman Polanski's eloquent tribute to "film noir," this one set in 1930s Los Angeles. Jack Nicholson plays detective Jay Gittes, whose relentless snooping puts him squarely in the middle of a bizarre and powerful family. John Huston and Faye Dunaway co-star along with Polanski in a memorable bit as a knife-wielding thug.

**MAJIC DAO THEATRE**  
22018 Woodward, Ferndale. Call

(810) 544-3030 for information. (\$4; \$3 students/seniors)

"A Clockwork Orange" (USA - 1971). 8 p.m. Sept. 14. A newly struck print of Stanley Kubrick's futuristic tale about an oddly charismatic young thug (Malcolm McDowell) who has equal enthusiasm for violent acts and the music of Ludwig Van Beethoven. Controversial when released almost 25 years ago and still shocking today.

"Grease" (USA - 1978). 7:30 p.m. Sept. 19 and 21. John Travolta and Olivia Newton-John come from different sides of the tracks in this kitschy tribute to 1950s music and morals. Based on the popular stage play.

"Bullet in the Head" (Hong Kong - 1990). 8 p.m. Sept. 20. An

encore screening of the film Hong Kong action master John Woo calls his favorite. Three Hong Kong friends embark for Vietnam to get their piece of the lucrative black market but end up battling gangsters, soldiers, and themselves.

**MAIN ART THEATRE**  
118 N. Main Street at 11 Mile, Royal Oak. Films play through at least Thursday, unless noted otherwise. Call (810) 542-0180 for information and showtimes. (\$6.50; \$4 students and matinee; \$3 twilight)

"Jeffrey" (USA - 1995). A gay actor/writer living in New York vows celibacy in fear of contracting AIDS, but then meets the man of his dreams who just happens to be HIV-positive. "Star

Trek's" Patrick Stewart recalls his stage actor origins in his turn as a flamboyant interior decorator.

"The Usual Suspects" (USA - 1995). Five guys who meet in a police lineup join for a simple heist. What happens next will keep you guessing in this cleverly scripted caper starring Gabriel Byrne, Kevin Spacey, and Chazz Palminteri.

"The Brothers McMullen" (USA - 1995). For what some people spend on a new car, Edward Burns made this engaging first feature about a young screenwriter and his two brothers in contemporary Long Island. Burns calls his audience pleasure a "romantic comedy for guys" and what it lacks in acting and production values it more than makes up in charm.

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