

MOVIES

'The Fan' has moments to cheer, and boo

BY DAVID GOODMAN
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

NEW YORK (AP) — San Francisco knife salesman Gil Renard (Robert De Niro) lives for baseball.

With an ex-wife who despises him and a career in freefall, the unloved confines of Candlestick Park are a happy, green haven. For Renard, it's a place where time stands still, where he can connect with his idealized boyhood.

"Baseball is better than life," he says. "It's fair."

Fourteen years ago, Renard began following the career of high school center fielder Bobby Rayburn (Wesley Snipes). Now a swaggering superstar, Rayburn has been lured back to the San Francisco Giants in a controversial deal worth 40 million dol-

lars.

When the beleaguered Rayburn falls into a no-hitting slump, the salesman casts himself as the white knight who will defend Rayburn from his critics and earn his undying friendship.

Renard only "knows" Rayburn through the newspapers and a brief exchange on a sports talk radio show hosted by Jewel Stern (Ellen Barkin). But he's just crazy and desperate enough to picture Rayburn and himself as comrades in victimhood.

And when he thinks Rayburn's terrible form may be due to teammate Juan Primo (Boncicio Del Toro), Renard's obsession turns to thoughts of murder to restore his idol's reputation.

The movie's virtues are centered in its first two-thirds, where De Niro and Snipes get the space to unveil their subtle,

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mixed characters.

Another big plus from director Tony Scott ("Crimson Tide," "Top Gun") are the right-there-at-the-plate baseball sequences, which include an appearance from ex-major league infielder John Kruk and technical advice from baseball legend Cal Ripken Jr.

There's also a superb, thumping soundtrack featuring The Rolling Stones, Nine Inch Nails and Santana, among others.

But "The Fan" has drawbacks, too. Considering the amount of action, the latter part of the 120-minute movie is strangely plodding as De Niro's character, so shaded at the beginning, is allowed to turn into the standard, cardboard stalker.

The movie reaches a peak in a scene where Renard gets to hang out with Rayburn at his beach house after rescuing Rayburn's son from drowning.

But the carefully cherished, idealized image of his hero is blown to pieces when the straight-talking Rayburn dismisses die-hard fans as "losers." The fan's fragile adoration switches all too easily into the hate of a spurned lover, and Renard kidnaps Rayburn's son.

From this point on, it's all downhill. With a plot line that manages to be both cliched and unlikely, the movie's final 20 minutes start to resemble an expensively filmed but vacant made-for-TV movie.

Until that moment, the screenplay by Phoebe Sutton does a nice job giving Rayburn some dimen-

sion. We see him struggling to conquer a crippling neurosis — the belief that he can't play without the number 11 on his shirt — and working through his simmering dislike for Primo.

De Niro's Renard initially seems normal enough — just a guy going through a bad patch — but Scott keeps introducing little clues to show that everything's not as it seems.

At the opening day Giants' game with his young son, for example, Renard trends on the boy while clambering to catch a ball that's flown into the stands. Later, he tries to make amends by buying the kid a pizza, but seems unaware that his son hates mushrooms.

The movie has Renard a peddler of knives — which creates an air of menace around his character and provides excuses for

much ghoulishness later on.

Not surprisingly, De Niro seems to have perfected his routine from "Taxi Driver" and "Cape Fear." The now predictable repertoire of psycho moves are all here — the twitching, the cold stare, the curled-down lip, the crazy smile where the eyes crinkle sinisterly.

The overly familiar performance is also lessened by some annoying, intrusive camera work. There are a few too many jump-cuts and extreme close-ups used to create tension. It's like the camera is the star here.

Considering the film's collection of talent, that's an odd choice.

"The Fan" is produced by Wendy Finerman. The screenplay is based on a book by Peter Abrahams.

'The Spitfire Grill' engrossing, soul-searching saga

BY LINDA DEUTSCH
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

At the end of this long summer of loud, hyperkinetic, violence-riddled action movies, "The Spitfire Grill" may be the kind of quiet respite longed for by exhausted viewers.

A film about neither alien invaders nor pumped-up cops, "The Spitfire Grill" is a small story about people, set against the backdrop of a staggeringly beautiful new England landscape. It is by no means a perfect movie, nor one that can be embraced without realizing its glaring flaws. But its intentions are so honorable that most can be forgiven.

First, let's explain that weird title. "The Spitfire Grill" is a small-town restaurant that serves as the hub of gossip and socializing in the tiny burg of Gilead, Maine. It's where a young woman named Percy Talbott (Alison Elliott) comes to work after serving time in state prison. And it's where Hannah Ferguson (Ellen Burstyn), the crusty, aging restaurant owner agrees to take a gamble on Percy with surprising results.

Writer-director Lee David Zlotoff painstakingly sets the stage in the film's first half, showing Hannah's desire to sell the restaurant, her lingering grief over a son who disappeared into the Vietnam War and hints of a mystery that haunts her and the rest of her family.

Percy, the mysterious newcomer, is a subject of intrigue and suspicion.

It's a long, slow climb before we arrive at the center of the story — Percy's unique idea to help Hannah sell the restaurant.

The ex-convict, who helped operate the Maine Tourist Bureau while in prison (a neat little twist taken from a true story) recalls that someone once sold a cafe by running an essay contest. Bidders would send in \$100 and an essay on why they wanted the restaurant. (Again, Zlotoff says this is based on a true story.)

What happens as a result of the contest is predictable, but there are enough new twists to keep it from falling prey to cloying Hollywood cliches.

Percy's character, as developed by Elliott, is the movie's heart and soul. Although Elliott is likable enough, she falls short of the depth needed for a tragic heroine. A shockingly aged Burstyn creates a woman of many dimensions and even car-

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ries off the cornball ending with aplomb.

But perhaps the most fully

developed character is Hannah's daughter-in-law, Shelby, a touching portrayal by Marcia Gay Harden of a woman discovering her own capabilities in adversity.

Will Patton and Kieran Mul-

rony provide able male support, but this movie clearly belongs to the three strong women in control.

The flaws marring this effort are the subplots. The tale of the hermit who comes out of the

woods to collect canned goods from Hannah is carried on far past the point of interest, and the solution to his mystery is telegraphed early on. The history of Gilead, a town destroyed by deforestation and seeking

rebirth, seems superimposed on this human interest tale.

That said, "The Spitfire Grill" remains an engrossing, soul-searching saga in a time when such films seem in danger of extinction.



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SCREEN SCENE

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Magic Bag Theatre 22920 Woodward, Ferndale. Call (810) 544-3030.

■ "Switchblade Sisters" (USA - 1975). 9 p.m. Sept. 11. Quentin Tarantino was behind the major studio release of this disco-era girl gang movie in which the head of the Jexebels meets her match in a smart, sexy new recruit. Directed by Jack Hill.

■ "Trainpotting" (Britain - 1995). A runaway hit in Britain: the story of five liars, losers, junkies, and thieves on the road to self-destruction in modern-day Edinburgh.



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