

Don't waste your time in 'Slums of Beverly Hills'

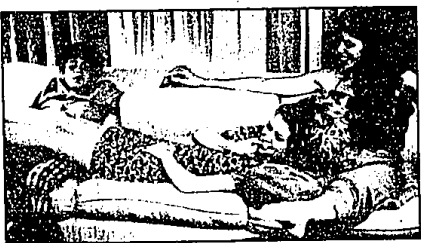
BY JON KATZ
SPECIAL WRITER

Perhaps a telling indication of a movie's merit is the extent to which its stars even remember the plot. Last week, co-star and Oscar-winner Maria Tomei told a national talk show audience that her character in "Slums of Beverly Hills" was "cousin to three kids whose mother has died." Oh, Maria, you are so cute, but so wrong!

It is clear that her uncle Murray (Alan Arkin) is divorced, not widowed, and his beleaguered custody of the trio is an important reason d'être of the story. It is also understandable why she'd want to put this well-meaning, but-uncomfortably crude tolling-of-first-time writer/director Tamara Jenkins' youth behind her.

Just inside the city limits of Beverly Hills are rows of low-rise hotels with names such as Belle Vista and Camelot that color to transients. And in 1976, there's no one more transient than those in the Abramowitz clan, who duck out as soon as the landlord comes knocking, and abandoning their few possessions. As down-on-his-luck dad Murray explains his good but unaffordable intention, "We're here for the school district; furniture is temporary, but education is permanent."

Murray faces his nomadic



Slumming: Eli Marienthal (left), Natasha Lyonne and Marisa Tomei star in "Slums of Beverly Hills."

future with blinders on ("I'm 65, I'm in the best shape of my life!"), while the kids seem content to eat a hearty dinner of Trix. Oldest brother Ben (David Krumholtz, a riot as elf Barnaby in Tim Allen's "The Santa Clause") is a wannabe actor who rehearses "Guy and Doll" in his underwear. Little brother Ricky (Eli Marienthal) doesn't mind sharing a bed with Ben and his nocturnal gas emissions (don't go yet—these are the least objectionable emissions in the film).

In the middle—and the

author's alter ego—is teenager Vivian (a wonderfully fresh-faced Natasha Lyonne), whose developing sexuality and overdeveloped bustline take us into areas that, thank you, we'd just care not to go. She lets a pot dealer, Charles Manson "Bab" wearing neighbor (Kevin Corrigan) under her blouse for some adolescent exploration, trivializing the episode as a "building thing." At least we're spared meeting the building's less worthy neighbors. Enter kooky cousin Rita (the memory-impaired Ms. Tomei). She's just escaped from her lat-

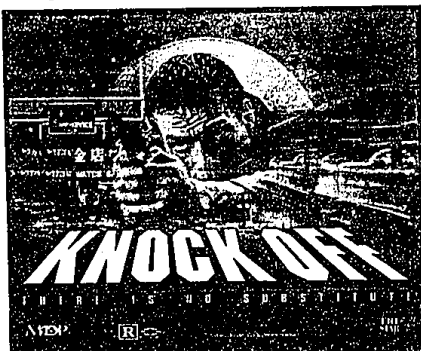
est rehab center, and her father (Carl Reiner, slumming himself for just one scene) offers to pay brother Murray to take her in and straighten her out. This allows the family to go movin' on up to an actual furnished apartment (finally—we're rich!). It also allows Rita to teach Viv a few things every budding woman should know, like how to disco dance with a vibrator. The scene may have played as groundbreaking in the Fox screening room. It should have been left in the ground.

Viv's anatomy—she whines on about having inherited her mother's breasts and her father's nose—and her bodily functions and fluids are the grist for this actor Jenkins did what she was taught—she wrote about what she knew. Trouble is, her anger is uninteresting, and her characters are unlikeable. She admits it herself, through Viv: "The whole family is sick. I hate us; we're freaks." Well, as we said in the 1970s, Right On.

Natasha Lyonne has played the daughter of Woody Allen ("Everyone Says I Love You") and Richard Dreyfuss ("Krippendorf's Tribe"), as well as Meryl Streep's niece ("Heartburn"). That's some pedigree, and her performance is the film's highlight. If you really want to see

Alan Arkin and Carl Reiner cook, go rent "The Russians are Coming, The Russians are Com-

ing." It's been 30 years since they made it, and you'll still laugh your angst off.



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Music producer offers dream list

BACKSTAGE
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As our summer season rumbles onward, I've been eliciting season previews from our on-camera hosts. But this week I called a behind-the-scenes guy: Backstage Pass music producer Ron Pangborn.

Now, we have a lot of top-notch music contributors who advocate all kinds of guests for the show.

And it doesn't matter if they're performing jazz, opera, rock or country—Ron has to make it sound amazing. From making most of the calls for music bookings to technical and equipment rundowns to working with our crack crew on the final air mix week in and week out, it's Ron who brings it all together.

...So, what better than Ron to give us, a musical preview of the upcoming season on Backstage Pass? Of course, given the fickle nature of music booking, it would be impossible to predict which acts will actually make it onto the Big Show. So I told Ron to consider this an open letter to Santa—what do you wish for in Season Three?

One of my main objectives will be to reintroduce people in Detroit to the master musicians who still live here. We've done fairly well with that with people like Hal McKinney, Russell Green, Marcus Belgrave and some others. I'd like to continue.

Who's on your wish list? "For starters, Chicago Pete. He's a blues guy who will be performing at Montreaux with the Rodney Whitaker Quartet." Rodney appeared last season on Backstage Pass. "It should be a rocking show. Rodney is Pete's son-in-law, so there's a family connection there."

"Johnny Bassett is another blues guy. The hook with Johnny is that he was in the Fortune Records rhythm section, an old Mom and Pop, pre-Motown, Detroit-based label that did very well in its day. The Fortune Records building was on Cass Avenue not far from where the Town Pump is now."

"And Beans Bowles was like the born guy at Motown. What Biall Allen was to drums and Earl Van Dyke was to keyboards, Beans was to the horns at Motown. He was also involved in the presentation of the acts when they went out on the road. A lot of them were young kids, and he helped them with their touring etiquette. He's a great horn player, and still gigs around."

recall Mr. Carter's appearance on the show, the concept was to put together an ensemble of artists who influenced Carter—a fast-rising star in contemporary jazz—during his formative years in Detroit. "So, as opposed to coming in with his regular touring ensemble, maybe we put together some of these Fortune Records guys to play with Johnny Bassett. Some of them are still around. They could give us a perspective on what was going on in Detroit before Berry Gordy made his mark." That would be fascinating!

What else? "Every season we deepen our relationship with major record labels, and they provide us with national touring

and recording acts. I hope that this year we actually have an opportunity to co-sponsor concerts with either radio stations or performance venues. I sense that this year we might try to do more rock. We've always represented it, but we've been hampered by so many things that we haven't always done as much as we should. I also want to get some contemporary Gospel on the show, plus world music and reggae. And we hope to continue our good relationships with all the players in Detroit's classical scene."

As Backstage Pass continues to earn high marks as a showcase for music on television, we can

afford to be ambitious. Like Ron says, "We stand up in comparison to any of the shows that do music—Letterman, Leno, Conan—we're doing as well, often better. We put out a first-rate product in terms of sound."

On tonight's show, Gerry Craig tours the Brodhead Armory. Blair Anderson hosts a performance from last spring's Plovers Theatre production of "Joe Turner's Come and Gone," plus music from Jewel collaborator Steve Foltz and the Arianna String Quartet. That's on Backstage Pass, at our new time—7:30 p.m. tonight, repeated Friday at midnight on Detroit Public Television.

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