

# 'Reindeer Games' won't win over movie-goers

BY JON KATZ  
SPECIAL WRITER

When a studio bumps the release date of a motion picture from crowded Christmas Day to the limbo of late February, that's like a platoon leader volunteering one of the soldiers for a suicide mission. "Reindeer Games" has been sent to the front, and it won't be coming back.

Stare Ben Affleck, Charlize Theron and Gary Sinise are three of the more appealing performers on the big screen today. Playing, respectively, an ex-con and two avenge buckets, their appeal in crime-thriller "Reindeer Games" is whittled down so extensively that only their biggest and most forgiving fans

won't miss the money spent on seeing it.

Awaiting his impending release from a five-year prison sentence for robbing a bank, Rudy Duncan (Affleck) is envious of cellmate Nick (James Frain). Nick has been exchanging letters and life stories with a woman named Ashley (Theron), whom he has never met. Pictures of the gorgeous pen pal adorn their cell walls.

Just before their parole, Nick is killed in a prison riot. When Rudy is released and Ashley mistakes him for Nick, Rudy takes one look at the girl in the flesh and doesn't argue. You don't have to have been a prisoner for five years to go along with him on that one.

But to enjoy the benefits of Nick's future, Rudy must also assume the burdens of Nick's past. Having learned that Nick had worked at an Indian casino in northern Michigan, Ashley's brother Gabriel (Sinise) has been planning for months to rob the place using Nick's inside information. In too deep by now, Rudy is forced to force the identity switch, despite having almost none of Nick's knowledge of the casino.

There are more twists and turns in "Games" than on the snowy state roads they take to the casino. Who can Rudy trust, and how long can he stay one head ahead of those he can't? Oddly enough, the "surprise ending" may not be as surprising to some

as those in the film's middle. Once you've got the rhythm of the thing, you may just nod your head knowingly when the plot plays out.

Affleck is more than capable of playing the boob caught in his own deception. Wanting only to return home for some of mom's hot chocolate, he finds himself locked in a motel room, trapped under a frozen pond and on the wrong end of a few million rounds of machine gun fire.

Through it all, his Steve McQueen-like charm and charisma get him out of trouble both within the movie and in being in the movie in the first place.

Sinise and Theron don't fare as well. Scraggly haired Gabriel is an insult to cast everywhere; as a villain, his one-note character seems an unnecessary and ill-advised pit stop for the overly qualified Sinise. Theron is cute and convincing in her first scenes as the dupe in the story.

When her motives emerge, however, Theron can't pull it off as a leather-tough moll. Her South African accent comes out clearly during her few emotional moments.

Veteran director John Frankenheimer ("The Manchurian Candidate," "Honor") is at his best choreographing the multiple chases and gun fights. When the characters have to speak, one waits for the Uzis to drown them out again.

## Film blends horror, realism

BY GREG KOWALSKI  
STAFF WRITER  
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Here's the plot: A group of young filmmakers goes into the wilderness to investigate a terrifying local legend. They disappear and the only record of their fate is found on the videotapes they made that are unearthed later.

"The Blair Witch Project," right?

Wrong. This is the plot of "The Last Broadcast," a film made a year before "Blair Witch" began its runaway success and which has been causing some rumblings among the horror film community (yes, there is such an entity) that "The Blair Witch" is nothing more than a royal ripoff of the obscure "The Last Broadcast." Is it?

Yes and no. Consider this plot: A group of young filmmakers goes into the wilderness to investigate a terrifying local legend. They disappear and the only record of their fate is found on the film that they took that is unearthed later.

Nope. It's the plot of "Cannibal Holocaust," a notorious Italian horror film made in 1978.

So everyone steals ideas. The key is how well you do it. "The Blair Witch Project" folks were

master thieves. "The Last Broadcast" gang were petty criminals.

"The Last Broadcast" has its moments, but ultimately fails to deliver the chills with the style or sheer horror factor of Blair Witch. But it's still worth checking out, especially if you want to make comparisons. And "The Last Broadcast" invites comparison.

The similarities are abundant. In "The Last Broadcast," which announces up front that none of the persons depicted are actors, filmmaker David Leigh binds the story together.

He leads us on a bumpy path as he chronicles the vicious murders of two hosts and the engineer of a local cable show called "Fact or Fiction," which leans towards the sensational.

To boost sagging ratings they hook up with a supposed psychic and go on location in the wilderness Pine Barrens of New Jersey to do a live broadcast about "The Jersey Devil," a murderous local legend. Only the psychic survives and is pinned with the bloody murders of his three companions.

But some videotape mysteriously turns up, which prompts Leigh to piece together their

story and what happened to them.

"The Last Broadcast" is strung together with interviews of doctors, police and film makers as it documents events leading up to the horrific finale. The photography is appropriately shaky, at times out of focus and complete with flubbed takes. The dialogue appears to be off the cuff and the scenes of the crew trudging through the woods could be outtakes from "The Blair Witch Project."

There is a sense of realism about the film that is admirable — until about the last 10 minutes.

Then everything falls apart as the plot takes a disastrous turn and completely undercuts the tension so carefully crafted to that point.

And that is the biggest distinction between this film and the far more effective "Blair Witch Project." That movie left you hanging. This one drops you off a cliff.

On its own, "The Last Broadcast" is still interesting and at least somewhat original. But "The Blair Witch Project" shows what it could have been.

"The Last Broadcast" was written, directed and produced by Stefan Avalos and Lance Weller. It is available only on video. Check your neighborhood video store.

## GUIDE TO THE MOVIES

### National Amusements Showcase Cinemas

**Greenville**  
Asheville 1231-114  
2100 N. Ochs Rd.  
Between University & Wilson Blvd.  
238-373-2600

Bargain Matinee Daily  
All Shows Until 6 pm  
Continuous Show Daily  
Late Shows Until 10:30 p.m.  
NP DEBITES NO PASS

NP PITCH BLACK (R)  
NP HANGING UP (PG-13)  
NP THE WHOLE HOLE YARDS (R)

NP BOILER ROOM (R)  
NP AMERICAN BEAUTY (R)  
NP THE BEACH (R)  
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Waters & Wayne Rd.  
313-425-7700  
Bargain Matinee Daily  
All Shows Until 6 pm  
Continuous Show Daily  
Late Shows Until 10:30 p.m.

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All Shows Until 6 pm  
Continuous Show Daily  
Late Shows Until 10:30 p.m.

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### United Artists Hollywood

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248-728-6572

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### Waterford Cinema II

750 Highland Rd.  
S.E. corner Mid-9 & Williams Lake Rd.  
241-666-7999

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## THE 2000 ACADEMY AWARD NOMINEES

**ACADEMY AWARDS BALLOT BOX**  
SEND IN YOUR BALLOTS AND ENTER TO WIN!  
AN ANNUAL MOVIE PASS TO AMC THEATRES

Rules: The person who has the most number of correct guesses will win an annual movie pass good for two people to any area AMC Theatres. In case of a tie, winner will be picked in a random drawing. You must be 21 and over to enter. Employees of the O&E, AMC theatres, Street Marketing are not eligible to win. Winner will be contacted by phone and announced in the paper on Sunday, April 2, 2000 in the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers.

**ENTRY FORM**

**BEST PICTURE:**

☐ AMERICAN BEAUTY

☐ THE CIDER HOUSE RULES

☐ THE GREEN MILE

☐ THE INSIDER

☐ THE SIXTH SENSE

**BEST ACTOR IN A LEADING ROLE:**

☐ Russell Crowe

☐ Richard Farnsworth

☐ Sean Penn

☐ Kevin Spacey

☐ Denzel Washington

**BEST ACTRESS IN A SUPPORTING ROLE:**

☐ Michael Caine

☐ Tom Cruise

☐ Michael Clarke Duncan

☐ Jude Law

☐ Haley Joel Osment

**BEST ACTRESS IN A LEADING ROLE:**

☐ Annette Bening

☐ Janet McTeer

☐ Julianne Moore

☐ Meryl Streep

☐ Hilary Swank

**BEST DIRECTING:**

☐ Tom Collette

☐ Spike Jonze

☐ Lasse Hallstrom

☐ Michael Mann

☐ M. Night Szymanski

**BEST ORIGINAL SCREENPLAY:**

☐ Alan Ball

☐ Charlie Kaufman

☐ Paul Thomas Anderson

☐ M. Night Szymanski

☐ Mike Leigh

☐ Topsy-Turvy

Send or fax entries by 5 p.m. Monday, March 13, 2000  
To: Keely Wygonik, Entertainment Editor, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers  
36251 Schoolcraft Rd • Livonia, MI 48150 • Fax (734) 591-7279

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ DAYTIME PHONE: \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_