



Crashing bore

Running on empty, 'Driver' stalls out

"The Driver" (R) is a film that never seems to find the right gear. Written and directed by Walter Hill, it is carefully crafted but lifeless. It reminds me of those paintings wherein artists turn vivid and spontaneous preparatory sketches into laboriously overworked and dull finished products.

The film centers on the rivalry between a professional getaway driver and a persistent cop determined to take him to the finish line behind bars. The dialogue, particularly that of the driver and the girl who alibis him, is minimal. The characters emerge from nowhere, reveal almost nothing about themselves and barely sustain our interest. They are not mysterious, simply vacuous.

The cop is a little more loquacious, more expressive and, certainly, more interesting. Chalk up another excellent performance to Bruce Dern, who again the was in "Coming Home" and "Black Sunday" shows his stuff, this time as the cop willing to take big risks to catch The Driver.

Unfortunately, Ryan O'Neal as the Driver and Isabelle Adjani as his girlfriend, The Player, make a pitifully miscast pair of lovers. Ms. Adjani, as a foreign actress in an American film and playing a role that has minimum potential, might be forgiven her wooden performance, but not O'Neal.

He seems to be sleepwalking through his part. If ever there was an unconvincing-looking criminal, it's O'Neal. He's so lethargic, one doesn't expect him to have the energy to press the accelerator, not to mention shift gears.

HOWEVER, THE MOST annoying quality of this movie, after all, is not the woeful acting of Ms. Adjani and O'Neal, but the pretentiousness of the story and treatment.

To omit names and to identify people simply as The Driver, The Player, etc., smacks of a misused artifice. It's as if the director read an analysis of American melodrama by an admiring French critic, and then tried to put together a movie by working backwards from the critique.

There is a dark and spare quality about "The Driver" that brings to mind the film of Hemingway's story, "The Killers," but it is a tenuous relationship.

In any case, what the foreign critics admired about American movies such as "The Killers," "The Postman Always Rings Twice" and the gangster films of the '30s was the seeming absence of art (but not style) and the bluntness of the action. "The Driver" certainly falls according to the first criterion. As for the second, folks who groove on chase scenes and apprentice getaway drivers may find this film a gas.

Otherwise, it has all the thrill of a dead battery.



Isabelle Adjani as the Player, gambles to win.

Glimpses

NEW RELEASES

BAD NEWS BEARS GO TO JAPAN (PG). Scrappy action with the Bears, their scheming agent, Tony Curtis, and a Japanese wrestler, not to mention the ball game.

THE BUDDY HOLLY STORY (PG). Based on the brief but brilliant career of one of the pioneers of rock 'n' roll. Features 12 of Holly's original songs.

THE CHEAP DETECTIVE (PG). Pater Falk and terrific cast vick in Neil Simon's comical takeoff on the Bogart movies of the '40s.

COMING HOME (R). Powerful story of Vietnam era with Jane Fonda as an officer's wife who falls in love with disabled vet (Jon Voight).

THE END (R). Black comedy about misadventures of an about-to-die guy, Burt Reynolds and Dom De Luise star.

EYES OF LAURA MARS (R). Suspense about fashion photographer (Faye Dunaway) haunted by terror.

FOUL PLAY (PG). A romantic comedy-thriller with a goodly number of laughs albeit many of them are "borrowed" from other films.

GREASE (PG). Broadway musical about the funky '50s is translated to the film with John Travolta and Olivia Newton-John.

HEAVEN CAN WAIT (PG). Warren Beatty's successful and distinctive remake of humorous fantasy, "Here Comes Mr. Jordan." Football player goes to heaven and returns to earth as business tycoon. Fine performances.

PROPER (PG). Burt Reynolds is the "greatest stuntman in the world" who has to go one better than his young up-and-coming rival (Jan Michael Vincent). Entertaining.

HOT LEAD AND OLD FEET (G). Jim Dale, Don Knotts and Darrin McGavin star in western comedy of two brothers competing for their father's inheritance.

NATIONAL LAMPOON'S ANIMAL HOUSE (R). Outrageous and raunchy comedy about life at Delta Fraternity House, the bottom-of-the-barrel frat on a small college campus in the early '60s.

REVENGE OF THE PINK PANTHER (PG). Peter Sellers is superb as the idiotic but successful Chief Inspector Clouseau. A fine addition to the "Pink Panther" series.

SGT. PEPPER'S LONELY HEARTS CLUB BAND (PG). Another musical exploitation film as Peter Frampton and the Bee Gees plot through jerky story built around 29 of the Beatles' songs. Aerosmith is dynamic, but too little, too late.

WHYLL STOP THE RADY (R). Taut, suspenseful movie of pursuit. Nick Nolte, Tuesday Weld and Michael Moriarty attempt to evade capture and unload two kilos of heroin smuggled from Vietnam.

MOVIE RATING GUIDE

G General audiences admitted.
 PG Parental guidance suggested. All ages admitted.
 R Restricted. Adults must accompany person under 18.
 X No one under 18 admitted.

High class cliché?

Cleo Laine: Good, bad news

By HUGH WELLS

Review

For the aficionados, Laine's get the accolades out of the way early. Cleo Laine and sax-playing husband John Dankworth are the epitome of entertainment. They are perfect for the Poconos, pure Las Vegas. Cleo can ride the crest of a crowd like a surfer. She is Diana Ross with British class. And the Meadow Brook crowd last Friday night listened, loved and applauded.

Rightfully so. Cleo has a voice like a castle corridor. Sound seems to reverberate from unknown depths. There are whispers of ghosts, growls from subterranean cells, echoes from unexpected corners.

She is a dozen singers. There are the breathy nuances of Nancy Wilson, the legato leaps into the clouds a la Morgana King. She rasps in the syncretized sandpaper sounds of June



Shall we dance

The play "The King and I" will be performed Friday and Saturday evening at the Will-O-Way Repertory Theater, 775 W. Long Lake Road in Bloomfield Hills. Marj Verguson of Birmingham will play Anna and Jack Cortes is the King of Siam. Reservations should be made through Will-O-Way.

school, lacking the shadings of Sid Catlett or Chick Webb (although he did some fine brush work).

END OF accolades. Aficionados may depart. The Meadow Brook program was high-class cliché. It's crux was emotional climax not creativity, sonority not subtlety. Most pieces creosced to a Strindberg-like finish, following the modern theory that the below is beautiful.

The program was predictable, for the most part, down to the classic cliché of black blues, know in some circles as "Jelly, Jelly," a song rewritten and re-mixed for generations by every black singer lacking imagination. The only good lyrics to it were probably dirty ones sung on a levee a hundred years ago.

A large portion of the evening was pure schmaltz such as Dankworth's playing of "You are the sunshine of my life," and "This time we almost made it."

Laine and Dankworth held folksy-casual sax-voice duets that consisted of little more than running thirds and some taal triple tonguing. They had the appeal of a Shirley Temple tap dance. What a waste of talent. In these duets you expect them to take off, go contrapuntal, leap into wild improvisation, modulate, chase each other around the scales, weave, vault, descend, blend, chatter. Sorry.

When Laine does her "Send in the clowns," it's nice but saccharine. One imagines that Mabel Mercer would do it—mimicry, underplaying with subtle phrasing. Go see Mabel in New York. Cleo, while she is still with us. You, after all, are special. You owe the audience more. The Meadow Brook audience would have appreciated it; it is a good cut about Las Vegas or the Poconos. You are Socko Without Soul. There is Billy Holiday in you and Sarah Vaughan. To hell with the crowd that would rather clap in rhythm than be quiet in respect. Just

for part of the program, part of your life, say to hell with schmaltz.

CLEO DID FOR a brief moment Friday night in the high spot of the evening, three poems set to music by Dankworth. The second one, which sounded like "Seething Boy," was unfamiliar to this writer (and there was no program). But it was sensitive, indeed beautifully done. Cleo seemed alive with the lyric. Dankworth's sax turned introspective, brooding not blatant, emotional not sentimental. They weren't playing to a crowd but to each other. It was a private conversation. Different, special.

There were other moments that erupted from cliché. For Dankworth, who is a finer arranger than sax player, the African bit by the author of "Hair" was interesting, rhythmically and harmonically. Cleo seemed to turn on especially in "I got the music in me" and "It don't mean a thing if you ain't got that swing." On the latter, Dankworth sounded more like Stan Getz than a studio sideman.

Even so, there was an astringent English quality to the evening. The identity problem is apparently catching. Paul Hart on piano and synthesizer doesn't seem to know whether his allegiance is to Bach, Victor Borge, Bacharach or the Beatles. He is a sort of poor man's Andre Previn. True to no roots he makes a commercial blend. And when he slips in a snippet of "Rhapsody in Blue" the crowd recognizes it, feels clever, and is sure a fine musician is in their midst.

In his case, the crowd may be right. Who knows? Certainly with Cleo Laine, it is obvious. She is a wellspring of talent. But it is eclectic not individual, public not private. It needs to jell, be more daring, experiment, reach out, get rid of sentimental trills, trade volume for sincerity, cliché for intelligence. Maybe Cleo should be black before being British. But if this is impossible, she and John should give art equal time with entertainment, maybe try a little more poetry.

How to send news items

News releases, photographs or other information can be mailed to Ethel Simmons, entertainment editor, at 1225 Bowers, Birmingham 9812 or delivered to the Birmingham, Southfield or Rochester office of the Observer & Eccentric.

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