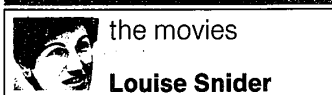




Emperor Ming (Max Von Sydow) rules the universe in the adventure-fantasy "Flash Gordon," opening Friday at Detroit-area movie houses.



the movies

Louise Snider

Cartoon heroes fill the screen during holidays

This has not been a banner year for films. I suspect the best, or most of the best, products are already in the theaters. Among these are "Ordinary People," "The Stunt Man," "The Great Santini" and, with qualifications, "The Elephant Man."

Meanwhile, the summer's hit "Airplane" is still flying circles around competitors at the box office and "The Empire" continues to strike back.

By Dec. 19, however, we will be inundated with a large crop of new films — the studios' slowest, costliest and, who knows, maybe even best.

We can look forward to a continuing fascination with cartoon and comic strip characters, namely "Popeye," "The Legend of the Lone Ranger" and the space fantasy, "Flash Gordon."

"POPEYE" STARS Robin Williams as the sailor man and Shelley Duvall as Olive Oyl. With Robert Altman directing, it should appeal to a large — and odd — combination of cinema buffs and bubble gum chewers.

There will be an abundance of comedies. In "Stir Crazy," Sidney Poitier directs Gene Wilder and Richard Pryor as a couple of looney tunes who try to rob a bank. They "dress up as woodpeckers and wind up as jailbirds."

Another comedian-bank robber who will be part of the Christmas scene is Chevy Chase. He plays Goldie Hawn's ex-husband in a Neil Simon romantic comedy, "Seems Like Old Times."

Clint Eastwood will try to repeat his commercial success of 1979, "Every Which Way But Loose," with a sequel, "Any Which Way You Can." Of course, the sequel not only includes his original co-star Sondra Locke but his favorite orangutan, Clyde.

For an adult comedy, referred to as "sophisticated," which usually is a euphemism for adultery, we have "Change of Seasons," with Shirley MacLaine, Anthony Hopkins and Bo Derek.

A TIMELY offering, as we are transitioning from one administration to another, is "First Family." The satire-spoof features Bob Newhart as President Manfred Link, Gilda Radner as his lusty daughter and Madeleine Kahn as "the woman behind the man."

Another comedy with definite social overtones is "Nine to Five." Jane Fonda, Lily Tomlin and Dolly Parton join their talents as a trio of secretaries who devise an outrageous scheme to squish their boss.

For a classy mystery, we have Agatha Christie's "The Mirror Crack'd." A large and distinctive cast that includes Elizabeth Taylor, Angela Lansbury, Kim Novak, Tony Curtis and Rock Hudson assure an aura of mature glamor.

About the only contender in the serious drama category is "Raging Bull." Martin Scorsese directed Robert De Niro in this biography of boxing champion Jake La Motta who went from rags to riches to prison.

Finally, there is the ubiquitous remake. This season it's Neil Diamond in "The Jazz Singer." The original, made in 1927, was the first talking feature film, so I guess we've come full circle.

what's at the movies

NEW RELEASES

AIRPLANE (PG). A picture that takes off. This spoof of all those "Airport" movies is one of the zaniest films around.

THE AWAKENING (R). Silly film about archaeologist and curse of long-dead Egyptian queen.

BAD TIMING/A SENSUAL OBSESSION. Nicholas Roeg's adult drama of pain-inflicting relationship between psychoanalyst (Art Garfunkel) and his lover (Theresa Russell).

DIVINE MADNESS (R). Energetic and electrifying Bette Midler in film version of the Broadway show.

THE ELEPHANT MAN (PG). Largely true story of grossly deformed man rescued from sordid life by compassionate doctor. Fine acting by John Hurt, Anthony Hopkins and John Gielgud balances out directorial shortcomings.

FADE TO BLACK (R). Terror as deranged young man dresses as his movie favorites to re-enact their scenes.

FIRST DEADLY SIN (R). Cop searches out killer responsible for series of bizarre murders. Frank Sinatra and Faye Dunaway star.

GLORIA (PG). Gena Rowlands plays it straight as ex-mobster's girlfriend who knows how to handle a gun, which she uses to protect boy whose parents have been murdered.

THE GREAT SANTINI (PG). Robert Duvall as Air Force pilot and dominating father in strong story of family conflict and love.

HOPSCOTCH (R). Chemistry of Matthau/Jackson pairing works again, but we don't see them together often enough in this halfway humorous (first half) film.

ITS MY TURN (R). Jill Clayburgh in humorous story as independent woman (again) who falls in love with ex-baseball player during week-end in New York.

LOVING COUPLES (PG). A comic look at follies of contemporary relationships, focusing on the love lives of four sophisticated.

MIDDLE AGE CRAZY (R). Tom Hanks in the family as Bruce Dern turns 40 and goes through midlife crisis that finds him pursuing his youthful fantasies.

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