



Andrew McCarthy (center, back) is Arthur Beniker, who heads a "family" of kids who flee a children's home in "The Beniker Gang." The others are Charlie Fields (left) as Edmund, Jennie Dundas as Cassie, Danny Pintauro as Ben and Jeff Alan-Lee as James.



## the movies

### Dan Greenberg

# 'The Beniker Gang' has all the warmth of family classics

How long since you saw a "G" movie that was neither animated nor a Disney true-life adventure? Thirty years? I bet you thought they didn't make movies like that any more. Well, you were right until "The Beniker Gang" opened recently. No, "The Beniker Gang" is not an old-style Cagney gangland movie. It is an engaging comedy about five young people who have no one but each other. In spite of its "goodie-two-shoes" aura and its "G" rating, the film is mature and should appeal to all age levels.

The gang is led by Arthur Beniker (Andrew McCarthy), an 18-year-old orphan who works in the kitchen of the Esther Watson Memorial Home for Orphaned and Abandoned Children in New Jersey. His dour supervisor, Mrs. O'Malley (Paddy Croft), looks like a refugee from a Dickensian orphanage who was cleaned up for this role.

But Arthur is able to sweet-talk Mrs. O'Malley with the wise sayings of his dear old Aunt Ida. In fact, Arthur is pretty glib all around and is able to sweet-talk readers in the 437 newspapers that syndicate his "Dear Lola" advice column.

But don't tell because only the gang knows that Arthur is Lola.

**WHO PLAYS THESE gang members?** Three very attractive and talented youngsters and one grown-up who doesn't look it. Twenty-one-year-old Jeff Alan-Lee is James, the quietest member of the gang, who spends most of his time hiding in a blanket-like bag. Jennie Dundas is Cassie, short for Cassandra, only gal in the gang, which also includes Charlie Fields as mischievous Edmund and eight-year-old Danny Pintauro as Ben, who eats paper.

All five members of "the Beniker Gang" are "innates" of the Watson Orphan Home, four because they are committed as wards of the court. Only Arthur is free to leave. He remains, however, because the other four are the only "family" he has ever known.

When potential, adoptive parents are found for Edmund and Ben, the gang escapes from the Watson Home to avoid separation. They set up housekeeping on their own, halfway across the country.

Complications ensue when the gang's new hometown looks askance at five kids living on their own without a guardian.

The five young people portraying the Beniker gang are five accomplished, experienced performers you've probably seen before. Dundas appeared in "Hotel New Hampshire," "Mrs. Soffel" and in the title role of the NBC mini-series "Little Gloria, Happy at Last."

**IN ADDITION** to his continuing role in "As the World Turns," Pintauro is the youngest who salutes the TWA pilot on national television. Although Alan-Lee's appearance in "Ghostbusters" wound up on the cutting-room floor, he has numerous stage and TV credits and has appeared with the Michigan Opera Theater in "Trouble in Tahiti."

Fields made his motion picture debut in "The Beniker Gang" following numerous television appearances and an Emmy nomination in "The Demon Murder Seed." McCarthy made his movie debut, in a role quite different from Arthur Beniker, in "Class" with Jacqueline Bisset.

Such an impressive list of credits reflects a lot of talent and experience, and their acting is uniformly excellent. The five have sufficient enthusiasm and naturalism to project just what the film is about, young people determined to make their own way through guile and charm but never harm or nastiness.

The film's pacing is a bit slow and uneven, particularly at the beginning. Its conclusion overdoes our patience with happy endings. In spite of that, touching moments, low-key humor and five engaging performers amuse and entertain you with antics as "The Beniker Gang."



Beniker, who writes a syndicated advice column in the guise of a grandmotherly Lola, gets some assistance answering his mail.

## table talk

### Oops department

Le Gala de Cuisine, gourmet food fest coming up Sunday afternoon at Cranbrook in Bloomfield Hills, will be held at Cranbrook School, not Brookside School, as stated in last week's Table talk column. For more information about the festival (tickets \$100 and up), call 645-3134.

### U.P. eateries

Vacationers in Michigan's Upper Peninsula can plan ahead where to find quality dining by picking up a copy of "Uncommon Eateries in Michigan's Upper Peninsula." Eleven restaurants are listed in a free brochure, available by sending a self-addressed, stamped envelope to Uncommon Eateries, Box 65, Germfask 49836.

### Good taste

"Taste of Detroit," annual Fine Foods Festival sponsored by the Michigan Restaurant Association, will be presented Friday-Sunday at Hart Plaza in downtown Detroit. Sample sizes of house specialties from 25 leading Detroit restaurants will be sold from noon to 11 p.m. Friday-Saturday and noon to 10 p.m. Sunday. Free musical entertainment also is part of the event.

### Kafay's updated

As part of a \$6 million renovation at the Hyatt Regency Dearborn, Kafay's Garden Restaurant will be redecorated this year. The restaurant also will have a new menu including seafood dishes, gourmet pizza and nutritional specialties.

— Ethel Simmons

DINING AND ENTERTAINMENT GUIDE

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