

Todd Graff, (from left) Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio and Ed Harris are among a team of civilian divers pressed into reluctant service by the U.S. Navy on a seemingly routine rescue mission in "The Abyss."



'The Abyss': It's so close to being abysmally bad

"The Abyss" (D-, PG-13, 135 minutes) is a strange movie. It strains credulity with an unbelievable plot, containing just about everything under the sun (and water), but still manages to keep your attention.

There's a Rambo-style U.S. Navy Seal lieutenant, underwater butterfly-like creatures from outer-space, a terrific submersible oil-rig and all kinds of slick underwater equipment and footage.

Then there's an imminent divorce that turns into a love story and a record dive as the hero goes down 10,000 or so feet in a slick diving suit while breathing liquid oxygen.

Oh yes, the extra-terrestrial butterflies have a several-mile wide space ship... that swims... and the heroine drowns in freezing water but is resuscitated 10 or so minutes later. I thought it was all over when you didn't get oxygen to the brain, but what do I know?

But then again the scenario and the 20th Century Fox story editor didn't have oxygen in their brains when they decided audiences would believe two guys could swim 1,500 feet below the surface without equipment, that a gal could be resuscitated and that benevolent aliens with fantastic technology would start all this trouble by accident.

The film opens with some strange, unknown mechanism creating enough underwater turbulence to crash a U.S. nuclear sub in deep water. There just happens to be an experimental submersible oil-rig in the area and their corporate owners agree to cooperate with the Navy's rescue mission.

The rig is commanded by Ed Harris whose soon-to-be ex-wife (Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio) apparently is the engineer who developed the rig in the first place. Naturally, she comes down to investigate the crash and help rescue nuclear warheads.

It gets even more complicated with Russian trawlers from Cuba, great storms at sea and the beserk Seal lieutenant.

The film fails because there are just too many plot threads, even for



the movies
Dan Greenberg

such a long film. The film's a real bummer and we never do find out what the aliens were doing there in the first place.

The strangest thing about "The Abyss," however, is that it is photographed and edited well enough to keep your attention, despite its total lack of credibility. Even when you know better, you'll find yourself swept up in these crazy events. I guess that qualifies "The Abyss" as a good/bad movie.

On the bad/bad side of the ledger, Freddy is back for the fifth time. This time he attempts to invade the soul of an infant. "Nightmare on Elm Street V: The Dream Child" (R) is there for them what like that stuff.

STILL PLAYING:

"Babar: The Movie" (G).

"Delightful animation of Babar stories."

"Batman" (C+) (PG-13) 120 minutes.

Michael Keaton is a dud in the title role but Jack Nicholson's Joker is terrific.

"Dead Poets Society" (A+) (PG) 124 minutes.

Robin Williams' sensitive portrait of a fine teacher is complimented by excellent young actors as his students.

"Do the Right Thing" (B+) (R) 120 minutes.

Sharp, incisive and entertaining commentary on today's urban America.

"Field of Dreams" (B+) (PG) 111 minutes.

Fanciful baseball story as Iowa farmer builds diamond so Shoeless Joe Jackson can play again.

"Friday the 13th: Part VIII - Jason Takes Manhattan" (F) (R), 110 minutes.

Count your blessings, they're only

Grading the movies

A+	Top marks - sure to please
A	Close behind - excellent
A-	Still in running for top honors
B+	Pretty good stuff, not perfect
B	Good
B-	Good but notable deficiencies
C+	Just a cut above average
C	Mediocre
C-	Not so hot and slipping fast
D+	The very best of the poor stuff
D	Poor
D-	It doesn't get much worse
F	Truly awful
Z	Reserved for the colossally bad
*	No advanced screening

threatening five more parts.

"Ghostbusters II" (C-) (PG) 102 minutes.

It's less funny the second time.

"Great Balls of Fire" (C) (PG-13) 105 minutes.

Jerry Lee Lewis is energetic and entertaining but biography is hokey wash of a decadent life.

"Honey, I Shrunk the Kids" (B+) (PG) 105 minutes.

It's fun but it ain't easy to be small.

"Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade" (B+) (PG-13) 120 minutes.

Good entertainment, but enough already.

"Karate Kid III" (D-) (PG) 105 minutes.

Boring, cliched sequel.

"Lethal Weapon II" (B+) (R) 115 minutes. Glover and Gibson do it again in high, albeit violent, style.

"Licence to Kill" (B+) (R) 105 minutes.

Number 16 in the 007 series with Carey Lowell as Dalton's lovely lady. Outrageous but entertaining.

ALTERNATIVE VIEWING

Cannes winner opens at DFT

By John Monaghan
special writer

When "sex, lies and videotape" took first prize at the Cannes Film Festival this year, critics were falling all over themselves with praise. You may wonder what all the fuss was about after seeing this clever but minor film when it opens the Detroit Film Theatre's 32nd season this weekend.

Don't get me wrong. Many of my favorite films are claustrophobic character studies full of talk. And at its best, "sex, lies and videotape" features a sparkling four-person cast in a biting, witty exploration of intimacy in the '80s.

Ann (Andie MacDowell) likes the security of marriage but shrinks from the touch of her handsome husband John (Peter Gallagher). He, meanwhile, carries on an affair with Ann's hard-edged sister Cynthia (Laura San Giacomo). Nothing really revolutionary here.

Enter Graham (James Spader), an old college friend of John's. He's the movie's wild card — a likeably screwed up, sleepy-eyed hero who rocks them all out of their complacent lies.

It's obvious that the friendship between John and Graham has weakened. John is a weaselly manipulator both as a lawyer and husband. Graham openly believes that lies are the second lowest form of human beings. First are lawyers.

ADMITTEDLY impotent, Graham reaches sexual fulfillment through videotaping women as they discuss their sexual experiences. Ann is at first appalled, but then succumbs. Cynthia jumps into it from the start. Both grow closer to Graham and farther away from John.

Produced for just over \$1 million, "sex, lies and videotape" is a success story for 26-year-old writer/director Steven Soderbergh. There's an occasional tricky camera angle, but the film works mostly in a naturalistic

way, presenting us with stifling normalcy and bizarre behavior that's not always easy to relate to.

Soderbergh believes that the film's little sums up its message.

"Sex, lies and videotape are what a lot of this country revolves around — the selling of sex, the telling of lies and the inundation of video," he says.

Fine, but again nothing startlingly original. Gogard was ranting about sex and the media more than 20 years ago. How hard is it to lampoon a yuppie lawyer? And Graham — even with his bizarre attitude toward sex — isn't the first screen seeker who isolates himself behind a movie camera.

Still, "sex, lies and videotape" opens at a time when audiences are probably tired of mindless summer movies. The film will definitely provoke some discussion — if nothing else to answer the question of why the film has achieved such great acclaim.

VIDEO VIEWING

By Dan Greenberg
special writer

Give top grades to two of Hollywood's finest movies now available for home video viewing — Danny Kaye's marvelous performance in "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" (1947, color, 110 minutes) and Gary Cooper in "The Pride of the Yankees" (1942, black and white, 128 minutes).

Neither are rated — and they don't need to be. Both reflect the public morality of an earlier era that insisted its entertainment be fresh and pure, no matter how unrealistic and no matter how much "truth" had to be swept under the rug.

Some say "Walter Mitty" was Danny Kaye's finest role. Whether or not that argument carries, this film will delight and entertain everyone. Kaye is masterful in the multiple roles of mild, meek Walter Mitty and the many dashing characters which inhabit his imagination.

My favorite is the RAF fighter-pilot who set the bone in his own broken arm and passed the feat off casually as he entered the bar. There's lots more, of course, as Kaye thwarts the villain (Boris Karloff), gets the girl (Virginia Mayo), survives his nagging mother (Fay Bainter) and grapples with numerous other unhelpful people and things.

Kaye, noted for his tongue-twisting songs, manages to work in a few of those as well in this, one of Hollywood's best productions.

Lou Gehrig was, indeed, "The Pride of the Yankees" and Gary Cooper was a perfect choice for this biopic in tribute to that great Yankee ballplayer.

NOT ONLY WAS Gehrig a fine athlete but, as well, he was a man of good character. That moral life, his exemplary conduct, fine athletic accomplishments and his courage in the face of an illness that led to an early death provide the ingredients for an inspirational film in the darkest days of World War II.

Finished shortly after Gehrig's death in 1941 from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, a degenerative muscular disease now known as Lou Gehrig's Disease, "The Pride of the Yankees" is a major production with excellence in every department.

The film opens with a parallel drawn between Gehrig's courage and that of the U.S. Armed Forces then struggling in the early stages of World War II.

The script was by Jo Swerling and Herman Mankiewicz, the latter having not too long before received an Oscar for the script to Orson Welles' "Citizen Kane." The music includes Irving Berlin's "Always," as is to be expected "Take Me Out to the Ballgame," and an appearance by Ray Noble and his Orchestra, one of the era's big bands.

The opening credits thank the New York Yankees and Mrs. Gehrig,

among others. Clearly a major production, the film features four major sports names as "themselves" with Babe Ruth at the top of the list followed by Bill Dickey, Robert Meusel and sportscaster Bill Stern.

Walter Brennan is sportswriter Sam Blake, Elsa Janzen and Ludwig Stossel are Gehrig's parents while Teresa Wright is luminous as his wife, Eleanor, but clearly Cooper shines above this talented crowd. The role, seemingly made for the Cooper persona, is one of his finest.

OF COURSE that may be a judgment filtered through the fine lens of hindsight. I don't know how accurate the film is insofar as Gehrig's life and character are concerned — Cooper's either for that matter — but it certainly hangs together effectively.

No question but the film is sentimental, and by today's standards, somewhat saccharine but that's part of its charm. Despite its naive and wonderment about the marvelous potentials of life and the almost unreal courage with which Gehrig/Cooper face death, "The Pride of the Yankees" is touching and inspirational.

Lou Gehrig was a shining white knight and Gary Cooper perfectly fits that role as he grows from shy, naive rookie to mature, accomplished star, one who learned well from life and is able, with equanimity to face happiness as well as tragedy in a sensible, prudent manner.

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