

## MOVING PICTURES



Annette Bening (from left), John Cusack and Anjelica Huston play con artists in Martin Scorsese's latest film, "The Grifters."

## 'Grifters' and 'Alice' are good slices about city life

Martin Scorsese sets his latest film, "The Grifters" (A, R, 110 minutes), somewhere between Humphrey Bogart and Mickey Spillane, a wise choice for a story of three con artists from the seamy underbelly of urban America.

In the best tradition of hard-boiled detective fiction — with a screenplay written by Donald Westlake who has 50 such novels to his credit — "The Grifters" opens with harsh, angular views of the city and music to match. Fittingly enough, Elmer Bernstein wrote the score and among his credits, "The Man With the Golden Arm" and "Walk on the Wild Side," two '50s films about how tough urban America can be.

"The Grifters" are con artists, Lily Dillon (Anjelica Huston), her son, Roy (John Cusack) and his sometime girlfriend, Myra Langtry (Annette Bening). Lily's major employment is placing bets on long shots at the track to reduce the odds for her bookies-boss, Bobo Justice (Pat Hingle). On the side, she's holding out on Bobo to build a retirement stake.

Roy pulls small-time cons and is usually successful. His gal, Myra, at this juncture in her career, is relying largely on her considerable physical charms although she longs to get back in the big-time stock markets. At one time before her husband, Cole (J. T. Walsh), had a nervous breakdown, they did very well with stock frauds and greedy oilmen.

ROY AND his mother, Lily, were never very close although she now would like to be. She turns up in L.A. after Roy is hurt by a bartender forcefully objecting to Roy's cons. She saves his life although their relationship is such that he feels a simple "thanks" is sufficient.

Quite an unorthodox triangle and the sparks of their relationships do fly. The tense, tight Westlake script and Stephen Frears' ("Dangerous Liaisons") taut, exciting direction combine with superb performances by the three principals to tell a terrific, entertaining story. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, "The Grifters" projects that side of our cities we'd just as soon forget once the pleasures of fiction have faded.

Pat Hingle as Bobo the Bookie and Henry Jones as Mr. Simms, the desk clerk at Roy's residential hotel, are particularly fine in supporting roles, fleshing out the landscape of the city so well-presented by Oliver Stapleton's cinematography.

There are three questionable plot elements that detract from "The Grifters." One is pretty obvious and noting it won't detract from your viewing pleasure. Lily's hiding place for her stash, the money she's skimming from Bobo, is not at all credible, particularly how she uses it so openly. To discuss the other two would "give it away," but trust me, as good as "The Grifters" is, it's not perfect.

MOVING UPTOWN and upscale back in New York, Woody Allen presents "Alice" (B+, PG-13, 100 minutes), a fanciful, romantic comedy about a lady in the land of privilege up on Fifth Avenue.

This is the 20th film Allen has written and directed and, as usual, he has assembled a bravura cast.



the movies  
Dan Greenberg

### Grading the movies

|    |                                 |
|----|---------------------------------|
| A+ | Top marks - sure to please      |
| A  | Close behind - excellent        |
| A- | Skill 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- | Doesn't get much worse          |
| F  | Truly awful                     |
| Z  | Reserved for the colossally bad |
| *  | No advanced screening           |

many of the folks he has worked with over the years, most notably Mia Farrow in the title role.

Much has been made by The New York Times of similarities between Allen's work and the films of Federico Fellini. Praise indeed, and, up to a point, quite true. The films of both gentlemen dissect the human psyche in a positive comic tone.

The comparison ends, however, when questions of style and atmosphere are raised. Allen is pure New York and his broad satiric American humor has a very different look and feel than Fellini.

Alice lives at the pinnacle of New York financial success with her husband, Doug (William Hurt), their children, a housekeeper, baby sitter, chauffeur — everything and more that financial success brings in New York.

But Alice, after 16 years of marriage, is unhappy and Allen dissects the dilemmas of American women by following her odyssey through life in New York.

CAN SHE HAVE a career? Is overseeing a full-time baby sitter the meaning of motherhood? Can she write? Can she express herself outside of the home? Can she find a cure for lower back pains?

The last question is answered by a Chinese herb doctor, Yang, who has some pretty potent remedies for both her physical and psychological problems. These herbs are, indeed, magical although his advice is much more straightforward, "Be yourself."

"Alice" departs from conventional American realism in the best of Fellini style as Alice experiences the strange effects of Dr. Yang's herbs. She also confronts the ghost of a former boyfriend, her mother's spirit,

images of her father and thoughts about Mother Theresa whom Alice worships for contributing so much to society by working with the poor.

Increasingly, the guilt Alice associates with her Catholic upbringing focuses on her privileged life and the decadence associated with such an existence in this sad, impoverished world.

"Alice" is a thoughtful, textured comedy and, as pleasant as it is, it does slow down at times. Although not as great as previous Allen work — "Crimes and Misdemeanors," "Purple Rose of Cairo," "Zelig" and "Hannah and Her Sisters," it is close. Well worth your time and money at the local Bijou.

The opening of "Come See the Paradise" was delayed after last week's deadline and now is scheduled for Feb. 1. Keep in mind last week's comments. The film is worthwhile but falls quite short of the mark.

### STILL PLAYING:

"Awakenings" (B, PG-13, 121 minutes). Robin Williams and Robert DeNiro as doctor and catatonic patient call to mind too many other films. The doctor's special care and sensitivity lead to temporary recovery, but film lacks spark expected from these talented actors.

"The Bonfire of the Vanities" (C+, R, 120 minutes). Unbelievable caricatures and jumbled subplots detract from discussion of the politics of justice.

"Child's Play 2" (C, R). Chucky's returns.

"Dances With Wolves" (A, PG-13, 180 minutes). Kevin Costner's magnificent ode to brotherhood and brutality on America's western frontier during and after the Civil War.

"Edward Scissorhands" (C, PG-13, 100 minutes). Unusual young man with scissors instead of hands shakes up the suburbs after moving in with the Avon lady and her family.

"Eye of Destruction" (C, R). Repressed doctor creates android in her own image.

"Flight of the Intruder" (B, PG-13, 95 minutes). U.S. pilots, Brad Johnson and Willem Dafoe, attack Vietnam missile complex.

"Ghost" (A, PG-13, 105 minutes). Banker's ghost (Patrick Swayze) hangs

Please turn to Page 4

## ALTERNATIVE VIEWING

## 'Theo:' A sketchy portrait

By John Monaghan  
special writer

Theo Van Gogh has been, until now, little more than a footnote in the career of his famous brother. The letters written by Vincent to Theo provide much of what we know about the great artist's life. The new movie, "Theo" (A, PG-13, 105 minutes), "Vincent and Theo," attempts to create a bold new portrait not only of the artist's inspiration and madness, but also of Theo's own troubled life. Unfortunately, the film — playing at the Maple Theatre — is far from a masterpiece.

Other biographies, both on film and written, might give you the idea that Theo was a Rock of Gibraltar next to his tortured and brilliant brother. Not so. Theo, who ran a small gallery in Paris, often went into debt to support Vincent's work.

The canvases that Vincent sent back were extremely hard to market. Art critics and buyers, still reeling from the Impressionists, didn't know what to make of Van Gogh's bold style and colors.

IN ONE OF the film's preacher moments, Theo attempts to stomach the ramblings of an art "expert."

When the man declares that the next major movement will be painting on black velvet, Theo loses it, insults him and tells him to leave.

Moments like this are more laughable than poignant. Meanwhile, the scenes of Van Gogh at work — floppy sun hat, canvas strapped across his back, in oppressive fields of sunflowers — have grown so common they're almost clichés.

British actor Tim Roth offers an especially psychotic reading of Van Gogh. He plays him the way Robert DeNiro might have — mouth slightly

Please turn to Page 4

## SCREEN SCENE

DETROIT FILM THEATRE, 5200 Woodward Ave., Detroit. Call 832-2730 for information. (R)  
"Tilal (The Law)" (Burkina Faso — 1990). 7 and 9:30 p.m. Feb. 1-2. A young man returns after two years away from his African village to find his fiancée has become his father's second wife. The new movie from Idrissa Ouédraogo, the director of last year's "Yabba," which co-won the Grand Jury Prize at the 1990 Cannes Film Festival.

"To Sleep With Anger" (USA — 1990). 4 and 7 p.m. Feb. 3. This contemporary portrait of a black American family won rave reviews, but small audiences. Danny Glover drifts into town and overextends his stay with old friends, only exaggerating the problems of the family. Written and directed with realism and healthy doses of humor by Charles Burnett.

DETROIT SCIENCE CENTER, 5020 John R, Detroit. Call 577-8400

for information. (\$5 museum admission includes ticket, \$2-\$4 children under 12)

"The Limit" (USA — 1990). through April 1991. The latest Omnimax spectacular intercuts amazing athletic feats with an analysis of how muscles and blood meet the challenge. Not intended for people with claustrophobia, the movie becomes a first-person "Fantastic Voyage" into the human body.

HENRY FORD CENTENNIAL LIBRARY, 13671 Michigan Ave., Dearborn. Call 943-2330 for information. (free)

"The Stranger" (USA — 1946). 7 p.m. Jan. 26. After the mixed reception of his early films, Orson Welles set out to make a strictly "Hollywood" movie. The result is this fascinating thriller about an escaped Nazi (Welles) hiding out in a small New England town. He marries a local girl (Loretta Young), teaches history in a local college and spends his free

time tinkering with the massive town clock, trying to get it — and the Nazi party — running again. Edward G. Robinson plays the detective hot on his trail.

LIVONIA MALL, Seven Mile and Middlebelt roads, Livonia. Call 476-1166 for information. (free)

"Key Largo" (USA — 1948). 10 a.m. Jan. 29. John Huston directed this low-key thriller, which gets better with every viewing. Humphrey Bogart plays a war veteran who stands still as gangster Edward G. Robinson terrorizes a hotel full of people, among them Lauren Bacall and Lionel Barrymore. Concluding the mall's month-long tribute to Bogart.

MAPLE THEATRE, 4135 W. Maple, Birmingham. Call 855-9091 for information. (\$6, \$3.50 twilight) "The Sheltering Sky" (USA — 1959)

Please turn to Page 4

## VIDEO VIEWING

By Dan Greenberg  
special writer

While it is somewhat predictable and clichéd, "The China Lake Murders" (1989, PG-13, 89 minutes) is entertaining enough to deserve some viewing time.

Sheriff Sam Brodie (Tom Skerritt) and his wife divorce when his job begins to depress him so much it interferes with their relationship. Weariness of the crime-ridden big city and its problems, he resigns from the police force to become sheriff in a small desert town, China Lake. There his secretary (Nancy Everhard) does her best in office and bedroom to revive his spirits and lift his depression.

While there may be some passion left in Brodie, it doesn't show very often. Whether it's Skerritt's laconic action or the Sheriff's character isn't quite clear.

Meanwhile, out on the highway, a psychotic is loose and we learn early on that it's police officer Donnelly (Michael Parks) on vacation from the problems of fighting crime and eating in the big city.

"What did you do last summer?" "Nothing much, just murdered a few dogs of society."

Like Brodie, Donnelly is despondent and feels that the system is not working. Unlike Brodie who continues to uphold law and order, Donnelly has chosen to be judge and executioner.

tions in China Lake and the interest and excitement here involves the audience knowing without while watching the hero discover the enemy within.

That's exactly what happens as Donnelly rides into town, introduces himself as a police officer, and offers to help Brodie solve the murders. Parks quietly and effectively underplays Donnelly's psychotic cynicism. The point is well-taken, not all psychotic killers are raving madmen.

Parks and Skerritt are an interesting pair, particularly on those occasions when Skerritt emerges from his shell. Everhard has a modicum of energy as the Sheriff's secretary and serves as a pleasant counterpoint to these two very serious cops.

But the problem with "The China Lake Murders," as a statement about the pros and cons of the American system of justice, is that Donnelly is just a psychotic murderer whose protestations about helping the system cleanse itself are empty rationalizations. The man enjoys murder as his opening atrocity clearly indicates when he murders a nice lady who happened to drive by at the wrong time.

Although the production values are pretty good, "The China Lake

Murders" is not well enough written to make it a prize winner. It will hold your attention and entertain for a while.

THIS THURSDAY, to serve a perceived interest in car-racing evidenced by the success on video and video of Tom Cruise's film "Days of Thunder," CBS on Video is releasing two other, racing films, "Le Mans" (1971, color, G, 106 minutes) and "The Racers" (1955, color, no rating, 112 minutes).

Both are available for the first time on home video with "Le Mans" featuring Steve McQueen, himself an auto-racer, in an epic look at Grand Prix auto racing filmed on location in France. "Le Mans" is noted for its excellent camera work. McQueen is an American racer out to win the big one, the 24-hour Le Mans endurance race, and overcome the adversity of his earlier failures.

"The Racers," also shot on location in Europe, features a host of 50 stars — Kirk Douglas, Gilbert Roland, Cesar Romero, Lee J. Cobb, Katy Jurado and Beth Darvi. "The Racers" is all in the determined drivers on the European circuit and location footage includes scenes from Italy's Mille Miglia and the Grande Prix de Monte Carlo.

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