

Art films flourished during 1993

BY JOHN MONAGHAN
SPECIAL WRITER

This was far from a red-letter year for Hollywood. With the exception of "Groundhog Day," most of the movies on this year's list of favorites fall into the high-brow independent category. Most played in limited runs at the Detroit Film Theatre or Main or Maple theaters.

"The Crying Game" — I caught Neil Jordan's Irish thriller about a month before all the hype, which left me wide open for the gender-bending twist. Stephen Rea is perfect as a reluctant IRA hit man whose friendship with a political prisoner (Forest Whitaker) leads to a bizarre chain of events.

"The Piano" — Jane Campion's third feature is a mythical, moving story set in the wilds of New Zealand. Holly Hunter plays a mute woman in an arranged marriage to a local who doesn't love. The only hope comes through her beloved piano, which a neighbor (Harvey Keitel) uses to attract and then seduce her.

"Brother's Keeper" — It proves once again that there's nothing more fascinating than a good documentary. The focus is on the Ward boys, four illiterate

MOVIES

bachelor brothers working the family farm in upstate New York. When one is charged with killing another, the community that once shunned them comes to their defense.

"Bullet in the Head" — "Hard Target" was a lot of fun, but for a true taste of Hong Kong director John Woo you had catch his masterpiece during a week-end-long run in Ann Arbor. When three friends unite in a search for the hell of war-torn Vietnam. The action scenes are appropriately over-the-top, while the "The Deer Hunter" for intensity.

"Groundhog Day" — I usually hate Bill Murray movies, yet here I was walking out with a wide grin. This feel-good Hollywood comedy doesn't disappoint. "Wonderful Life," begins with a clever premise (weatherman relives the same dull day over and over again) and then takes off in unexpected directions.

"Nashville" — The re-release of this more fascinating than a good documentary. The focus is on the Ward boys, four illiterate

Country music and a presidential election mix in this inspired hodgepodge of solid acting (Keith Carradine and Lily Tomlin, among others) and dizzying directorial style. Altman overrated "Short Cuts" only pales in comparison.

"Household Saints" — "True Love" director Nancy Savoca could have found a nice, safe script so she could make a bundle in Hollywood. What does she do instead? She makes a movie about the power of Catholic upbringing in New York's Little Italy. The result was box-office poison, but one of the year's rarest and most uncompromising treats.

"Much Ado About Nothing" — Kenneth Branagh proves once again that The Bard is alive and well at your local movie theater. This highly accessible adaptation of a lesser Shakespearean comedy shines in the love-hate relationship between Branagh and real-life wife Emma Thompson. Denzel Washington fares well, Michael Keaton and Keanu Reeves less so in the star-studded supporting cast.

"The Age of Innocence" — Shleved for almost a year, Martin Scorsese's detailed portrait of 19th-century New York was worth the wait. Daniel Day-Lewis and Michelle Pfeiffer play unrequited lovers in the faithful rendering of Edith Wharton's novel. Not since Oregon Walle's magnificent "Ambersson" has a great director

paid such a stunning (sometimes over-the-top) homage to a time long past.

"The Snapper" — First came "The Commitments" about a naive music promoter determined to bring soul to Dublin. This new film, the second in a proposed trio, focuses on basically the same large Irish-Catholic family. More unexpected than the oldest daughter's pregnancy is the clever way the story unfolds. (Although it opened elsewhere in December, we'll see this one locally at the DFT in January.)

Honorable mention: "Menace II Society," "In the Line of Fire," "Metropolis" and "Woman in the Moon" (with live musical accompaniment by Drop at the Mag Bag, "Like Water for Chocolate," "Passion Fish," "Farewell My Concubine," "Manhattan Murder Mystery," "Hard Target," "Adams Family Values," "Remains of the Day" and "The Secret Garden."

Still haven't seen: "Schindler's List" and "Searching for Bobby Fischer."

Most significant film event locally: The opening of the Main Art Theatre in Royal Oak.

If you have a comment for John Monaghan, call him at 953-2047, mailbox 1866, on a Touch-Tone phone, or write to him care of Street Scene, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, P.O. Box 30251, Schoolcraft, Livonia 48150.

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asked why older songs are on the CD.

"A lot of people liked that ("Biggest Head in America") song. It was a part of my life so I stuck it on," Monster said. The self-produced album, Monster feels, best represents her style of music.

"It's more true to what I love. It's definitely got that raw feeling and I left in several mistakes which to me is beautiful," she said. "Some of my favorite records sound like crap but the energy is there. It definitely sounds more like I should have sounded before."

Testing, one . . .

Monster & The Puss will test out its new material on New Year's Eve at the Falcon Club, 3515 Caniff, Hamtramck (368-6010). The album, to be recorded at the Tompermill in January, is tentatively titled "Ten Famous Original Songs." "We're sure they're going to be famous and we wrote them so we know they're original." They're not sure if there's going to be 10 songs which is what makes the title tentative.

The songs have a significantly darker feel than the previous "The Complete Works of Goober & The Puss."

"I think people said it was a little more psychotic. It's more

'We're more like traditional '70s funk music . . . We're more along the lines of Average White Band . . . Earth, Wind and Fire.'

Perry LaVoisne

'Don't Be Afraid' and 'Let's Hunt for Grannies' than 'Funky Cowboy.' There will be a couple of pop gems for the kids of today. It will have the atmosphere of an eerie, psychotic cocktail party."

For the adventuresome few, Honky Dory member Dan McCourt of McCourt's Music in Pontiac will perform with his brothers at The Village Inn on Mackinac Island — opened to the public for the holiday.

The \$500 price includes three nights' accommodations for two people as well as a trip to the St Ignace casino. The hitch — the buses don't run on New Year's Day so you're more or less stuck on the island until Jan. 2.

"Basically you're stuck but that's good because that means there's nothing to do but get up and watch football on TV, drink a few beers and eat," McCourt said. For more information, call (906) 847-3542 or (810) 334-5150.

SCREEN SCENE

A sampling of what's playing at alternative movie theaters across metro Detroit as reviewed by John Monaghan.

MAIN THEATER
118 N. Main Street at 11 Mile, Royal Oak. Films play through at least Thursday. Call 546-0180 for information and show times. (\$5.50; \$4 students; \$3 twilight/matinee)

"The Piano" (New Zealand — 1993), call for show times. Jane Campion directed this stunning tale of a mute woman who arrives in the New Zealand bush as part of an arranged marriage. While her husband (Sam Neill) leaves her cold, she carries on a bizarre relationship with a neighboring settler (Harvey Keitel).

"The Summer House" (Britain — 1993). Joann Plowright, Julie Walter and Jeanne Moreau star in this very gentle-looking story about a young woman trying to escape marriage to a most unappealing suitor.

MAPLE THEATER
4135 W. Maple Road, Bloomfield. Call 855-9090 for information. (\$5.75; \$2.95 twilight)

"Heaven and Earth" (USA — 1993). Oliver Stone directed this account of a Vietnamese woman's experience both in war and peace in both her native land and in America. Tommy Lee Jones and Joan Chen star in this adaptation of Le Ly Hayslip's autobiographical books.

STATE THEATER
2115 Woodward Ave., Detroit. Call 961-5450 for information. (\$1)

"The Blues Brothers" (USA — 1980), 9 p.m. Dec. 27. Jake and Elwood Blues hit the Windy City in this raucous musical comedy, starring John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd. Better than the "Saturday Night Live" inspired humor

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