

'House of the Spirits' topples despite strong cast

BY JOHN MONAGHAN
SPECIAL WRITER

The stellar cast includes Jeremy Irons, Meryl Streep, Winona Ryder, Glenn Close and Vanessa Redgrave. The director is often compared to Bergman. So where does "House of the Spirits" go so horribly wrong?

Just about everywhere. Billie August's angst-filled melodrama about a powerful family in South America from the late 1930s through the early '70s in the height of art house pretentiousness. And while the movie has already snowed some local critics,

to me it came off an embarrassment.

Irons heads the cast as Esteban Trueba, a driven man who takes a run-down plantation and, through the sweat of local peasants, makes it among the most powerful in the country. Anxious from the constant threat of unionization, he enters politics and becomes an even bigger creep.

Now don't get me wrong. I have no problem watching unsympathetic characters on screen, but Irons, for one of the few times in his career, comes off horribly flat.

MOVIES

Chances are "Spirits" won't bring Streep any closer to the prominence she enjoyed in 1980s. She plays Esteban's wife, Clara, who has clairvoyant powers and, after a first-hand example of her husband's abuse, refuses to speak to him directly. She uses oracles to converse with him, a bizarre version of post office usually played for comedy.

But there's nothing at all humorous intended in this movie.

Even Ingmar Bergman, who Billie August tries so hard to emulate as director, got a lighter touch in later years. He took a similarly sprawling family saga like "Fanny and Alexander" and gave it warmth and humanity amidst a background of tragedy.

This isn't August's first offense. The success of the bleak but moving "Pelle the Conqueror" was followed by the stiff, Bergman-scripted "The Best Intentions." If the torpor really has been passed on from the legendary Swedish filmmaker, it grows

dimmer with each successive August film. Watching Glenn Close as Esteban's sister and housekeeper, I couldn't help but think of Gloria Leachman in those happy parts she's often forced to play. The script attempts to deal with leaching longings for Clara, but the stiff, Victorian approach again comes off comically.

Like most of the actors in the movie, Close ages some 40 years in the span of two hours. I felt I only aged half as much while watching. Winona Ryder plays the rebellious daughter who falls for handsome peasant rabble rouser Antonio Bandera. Their scenes take place amidst a political coup in the early '70s, when she is dragged away by the military and suffers at the hands of her lecherous half-brother, her father's bastard son.

You can get away with supply scripting, overacting, even a bombastic musical score in melodrama. Emotion, after all, is the key. But here, in "House of the Spirits," I kept wondering if the actors weren't secretly suppressing laughter as much as I was.

SCREEN SCENE

KINOTHEATRE
Capitol Theatre and Arts Centre, 121 University, Windsor, Call 615-971-5160 for information. (\$4.50)

"Fitzcarraldo" (Germany - 1982). 9 p.m. Apr. 9-10. In what may be Werner Herzog's most eccentric (and at 167 minutes, longest) undertaking, Klaus Kinski must lug a 320-ton ship over a mountain in the Amazon. Sure, the premise sounds great, but it's the story behind the making of the film (chronicled in the documentary "Burden of Dreams") that proves far more interesting.

MAGIC BAG THEATRE
22918 Woodward, Ferndale. Call

644-3030 for information. (\$4)
"Sid and Nancy" (Britain - 1986). 8 p.m. Apr. 7. Gary Oldman and Chloe Webb star as punk rock's penultimate couple in this least Thursday. Call 640-0180 for information and showtimes. (\$6.50; \$4 student; \$3 twilight attire)

MAIN ART THEATRE
118 N. Main Street at (11 Mile), Royal Oak. Films play through at least Thursday. Call 640-0180 for information and showtimes. (\$6.50; \$4 student; \$3 twilight attire)
"Four Weddings and a Funeral" (Britain - 1994). From Mike Newell, the director of "Enchant-

ed April," an engaging story about a confirmed bachelor who runs across the same woman at the numerous weddings he attends. Hugh Grant and Andie MacDowell star.

"The Hudson Proxy" (USA - 1994). The camera is the real star in this wacky account of a business graduate's rise from mail room to president's office in 1958. His invention, the Hula Hoop, becomes a Baby Boom phenomenon. Capra meets surrealism in this latest from Joel and Ethan Coen ("Raising Arizona" and "Barton Fink"), co-scripted by former Detroit Star Raimi. "Schindler's List" (USA -

1993). Steven Spielberg swept the Academy Awards with this story of Oskar Schindler (Liam Neeson), a war profiteer and Nazi con who saved the lives of over 1,000 Jews during the Holocaust.

MAPLE THEATRE
4135 W. Maple Road, Bloomfield. Films play through at least Thursday. Call 855-9090 for information. (\$5.75; \$3.95 matinee; \$2.25 twilight)
"Sins" (Britain - 1994). John Duigan ("Flirting") directs this story of a young Englishwoman's sexual awakening when she visits the eccentric and bohemian household of a controversial

painter. Sam Neill, Tara Fitzgerald, and Hugh Grant star. "Four Weddings and a Funeral." See Main Art Theatre listing above. "Schindler's List." See Main Art Theatre listing above.

STATE THEATRE
2115 Woodward, Detroit. Call 961-5450. (\$1)
"Fritz the Cat" (USA - 1972). 9 p.m. Apr. 4. The once-controversial X-rated cartoon is now a dated, but still funny, take on lifestyles of the '60s and early '70s. Conceived by Ralph Bakshi and based loosely on Robert Crumb comic characters.

'Fire in Sky' — unexpectedly good

BY LEANNE ROGERS
STAFF WRITER

An apparent visit to Arizona by aliens — the extraterrestrial kind as opposed to one from Mexico — has a tremendous impact on a couple best friends in the 1993 film "Fire in the Sky."

The generally understated film seems to have been directed to the wrong audience. It's not a paranoid sci-fi thriller or action-adventure film. While it's certainly about UFOs and aliens, it's more importantly about the human toll a traumatic experience takes a couple working stiff.

Based on a true story, the film opens with riders in a pickup truck, careening out of the mountains in terror. The men were part of a logging crew but when they return to town they are one person short. Led by their crew leader, played by Robert Patrick, the men agree to stick by their story. They are obviously aware that reporting their co-worker taken by a spaceship is going to be greeted

VIDEO

with skepticism by the authorities.

The always reliable D.B. Sweeney plays Travis Walton on whose book the film is based. Walton makes the bad choice of getting out of the truck to take a closer look at the flashing lights that leads to a nasty close encounter with aliens.

The film does a nice job of showing the relationship between the two men, the single Walton being more of a dreamer, just the kind of guy who would walk up to the UFO see what's going on.

James Garner is the veteran state police investigator who is called in to help with the case after the local sheriff hears the story. Garner's cop has seen it all and doesn't believe in the alien abduction for a minute. He figures one of them must have killed the missing man. When Walton turns up five days later, naked, dehydrated,

emotionally and physically traumatized, Garner figures it's a scam to make money selling his phony abduction story.

The performances are all very good in the film. Patrick is especially good as a man whose financial and family problems are serious before his friend disappears. Being suspected of killing his best friend by people he has known all his life and pursued by the media and UFO fanatics push him to the point of cracking.

The special effects of Walton in the spaceship are interesting and well done, but it's only a small part of the film. It's a very good film, directed by Robert Lieberman, that is compelling and rather unexpected.

"Fire in the Sky" is available on tape at local video stores. If you have a question or comment, call Leanne Rogers at (313) 953-2103 or write her at The Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia 48150.

In concert from page 6A

Friday, April 8
RUGS BEDDOO BRIGADE
O Club, 29 S. Saginaw, Pontiac. (910) 334-7411

BECK LUCY
With Sweetest at Alvin's, 5756 Cass, Detroit. (rock/psychedelic alternative rock) (313) 532-2355

WOOL
With Don Casabianco and Janitor Joe at St. Andrew's Hall, 431 E. Congress, Detroit. (alternative rock) (313) 961-MELT

JOHNNY ADAMS
Sully's, 4756 Greenfield Road, Dearborn. (blues) (313) 846-1920

NEUROMANCER
Studio Lounge, 6921 Wayne Road, Westland. (alternative rock) (313) 729-2540

MEK
With Reckless Youth at Augus, 31160 John R. Madison Heights. (rock) (810) 588-3121

MUTUAL ADMIRATION SOCIETY
Pegasus in the Fisher, 3011 W. Grand Blvd., Detroit. (jazz) (313) 675-7400

ROBERT PENN
Moody Dicks, 5452 Schaefer Road, Dearborn. (blues) (313) 581-3650

ROBERT MOLL BLUES MISSION
Speakeasy, 31410 Ford Road, Garden City. (blues) (313) 425-7373

BLUES ACTION COUNCIL
Stan's Dugout, 3350 Auburn Road, Auburn Hills. (blues) (810) 652-6433

MOTOR CITY SHAKERS
Sports — A '50s Bar and Grill, 166 Maple, Wyandotte. (blues) (313) 285-5060

600 STREET WIRE
Band Pg. 206-208 S. First St., (neo-hep rock) (313) 996-8555

PATTY RICHARDS
With the Jeff Kressler Trio at Bird of Paradise, 207 S. Ashley, Ann Arbor. (jazz) (313) 662-8310

FOUR HANDS
Java, 307 N. Main St., Rochester. (jazz) (810) 650-3344

CARTOON LIFE
With Fragile Egg Shell Minds at Griff's Grill, 49 N. Saginaw, Pontiac. (alternative rock) (810) 334-9292

THE LOOK
The Overtime Sports Tavern, 27206 Michigan Ave., Inkster. (rock) (313) 277-5010

"DR. DIRTY" JOHN VALLEY
With Slam Circus at The Ritz, 17580 Frisco, Roseville. (rock) (810) 778-6404

JAMES "JY" YOUNG GROUP
Former Slyr member plays the I-Rock, 16350 Harper, Detroit. (rock) (313) 881-ROCK

RENEGADE
Hoover Roadhouse, 24300 Hoover, Warren. (country) (810) 756-6140

BOOGIE MAN SMASH
With The Happy Accidents and the Deterrants at Fanny's Pub, 3965 Woodward Ave., Detroit. (alternative rock) (313) 831-9070

UNCLE JESSIE WHITE AND JEFF GRAND
New Site, 41270 Hayes, Clinton Township. (blues) (810) 286-7788

Saturday, April 9
DC TALK
The Palace of Auburn Hills, 2 Champion-Pond Dr., Auburn Hills. (Christian hip-hop) (810) 377-8200

THE VERVE PIPE
With the Hornbells at State Theatre, 406 S. Burdick, Kalamazoo. (alt/rock) (616) 345-6500

RUGS BEDDOO BRIGADE
O Club, 29 S. Saginaw, Pontiac. (blues) (810) 334-7411

TICKWEAR
With Looptygym at Alvin's, 5756 Cass, Detroit. (funk/rock) (313) 832-2355

SEAWARD
With Bruce AC at St. Andrew's Hall, 431 E. Congress, Detroit. (alternative rock) (313) 961-MELT

JOHNNY ADAMS
Sully's, 4756 Greenfield Road, Dearborn. (blues) (313) 846-1920

MEK
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Speakeasy, 31410 Ford Road, Garden City. (blues) (313) 425-7373

CURTIS SUMNER PROJECT
Cathy Davis Sports — A '50s Bar and Grill, 166 Maple, Wyandotte. (blues) (313) 285-5060

NIKKI JAMES AND THE FLAMETOWERS
Camille House, 2400 Grand River Ave., Detroit. (blues) (313) 535-3440

PATTY RICHARDS
With the Jeff Kressler Trio at Bird of Paradise, 207 S. Ashley, Ann Arbor. (jazz) (313) 662-8310

TEDDY RICHARDS
With Drunk Uncle and former lead singer of The Mud Jay Varough at Griff's Grill, 49 N. Saginaw, Pontiac. (rock) (810) 334-9292

THE LOOK
The Overtime Sports Tavern, 27206 Michigan Ave., Inkster. (rock) (313) 277-5010

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Music Notes from page 6A

Possum Dixon will play St. Andrew's Hall in Detroit, on Saturday, April 16, with the Rev. Horton Heat. Call (313) 961-MELT for more information.

Members of the local roots quartet The Volebeats got bored with trendy sounds and turned toward their acoustic guitars upon forming the band in the 1980s. What they didn't realize was that the dreaded "A" (alternative) and "C" (country) words were going to be the driving forces behind the Detroit-based group.

"It has just taken an identity of its own," said guitarist Matthew Smith during an interview at the Beat Hotel record store in Berkley. As a result, the former street corner musicians have become bigger fans of "real" country music produced by the likes of Johnny Cash.

"We still don't have anything in common with ('Young Country' bands)... Those country bands all sound like New Kids on the Block," he added.

Later this month The Volebeats will release the "Up North" live debut for the New Hampshire-based Safe House Records which also works with the Lunachicks and Half-Japanese. "Up North" follows the 1992 release of their Icon Records single "Knowing Me, Knowing You," the reworking of Abba's hit single.

The Volebeats — which also includes vocalist Jeff Oakes, guitarist Bob McCreedy, bassist Russ Ledford, and drummer Blair McDonald — will celebrate the upcoming release with a Friday, April 8, party at the Magix Bag Theatre Cafe, Woodward Avenue north of Nine Mile Road, Ferndale. The Demolition Dollredo open the 18 and older show which begins at 9 p.m. For

'What we were doing was playing to no people so there were no nerves to wrack; nobody knew who we were.'

Rob Zabrecky
Possum Dixon

more information, call (810) 644-3030. For more information about the release of "Up North," write Safe House Records, P.O. Box 5349, W. Lebanon, NY 03784-5349.

The theme song from the sitcom "Charles in Charge" doesn't seem like it would be high on the list of songs that rock bands would like to cover. But Lemonheads lead singer Evan Dando said he was crushed when his new favorite band Smudge beat him to the punch and recorded it on their latest album. Nevertheless, it was one of 11 songs that Dando did at Ann Arbor's Tower Records during an in-store performance; that also included "It's About Time," "Confetti," "I Ain't Your Arms" and "Being Around."

During the performance, which was broadcast live on Ann Arbor pop rock radio station WQOB, Dando was accompanied only by his "Doggie Howser guitar," a brown wood Gibson model. The wide-eyed Dando, who recently shaved off his trademark long brown locks, couldn't really explain why he called it such. "I don't know. I just know it kind of rudimentary."

After his show he travelled to East Lansing to join his band for a show at the MSU Auditorium. The band will return to the area

on Saturday, June 11, to open for Lenny Kravitz at Pine Knob Music Theatre. Call (810) 377-8200 for more information.

To leave a message for Christina Flucco, a dial (313) 953-2047, mailbox number 2130, on a touch-tone phone or write her at 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia 48150.

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