

MOVIES

'Impostors' hilariously celebrates the actor's art

By HUGH GALLAGHER STAFF WRITER

If Stanley Tucci's 'Big Night' was a celebration of food and cooking, his new film 'The Impostors' is a celebration of theater and acting.

ball comedy and a little French farce that is sometimes as rich as Primo's timpano in 'Big Night.' But at the heart of this movie is a love for acting and actors who will do anything to play a part.

of a wild cast of characters, in the grand comic tradition, each played by a wonderful actor - a Nazi chief steward (Campbell Scott), the sympathetic object of his unwanted affections (Lili Taylor), a suicidal lounge singer (sad-eyed Steve Buscemi), a revolutionary first mate (Tony Shalhoub), the memorable Primo in 'Big Night'), a leering Bill Tilden-type tennis star (Billy Connolly), an aspiring queen sensation (Alfred Molina), they insult the pretentious star at a theatrical watering hole, which leads to a chase, which leads to them being stowaways on a 'ship of fools.'

comic tradition and play it out for full value. An early scene sums up what 'The Impostors' is all about. Tucci and Platt make faces at each other, grand and subtle, competing with each other to create just the right face for the intended emotion. This is what acting is all about, finding the right face, the right gesture, the right turn on an old routine.



Theater critics: Oliver Platt, left, and Stanley Tucci take a dim view of a ham actor's performance in 'The Impostors.'

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sets a sure course for what he wants. Stanley Tucci has now joined Allen as a comedy director with a deep respect for his actors and a gift for dialogue and action that parodies and twists rather than repeats the clichés of the genre. 'The Impostors' is broader than 'The Producers' and is intended to be artificial. It doesn't have the warmth of that film, but it makes up for it with its knowing comic spirit and munny belly laugh routines.

The usual elements are here but played with perfectly choreographed style - the slamming doors, the person under the bed or in the closet, the over-the-top vamp, the foot chase followed by the pratfall, the comic dance, the innocent lover. 'The Impostors' has a beautifully explosive ending. And don't leave before the credits are over, because Tucci puts a fine exclamation point on this tribute to his art.

What Dreams May Come is goeyly lost at heaven and hell

BY LAWRENCE ULRICH SPECIAL WRITER When it comes to expressing misty-eyed wonder or grief, few actors can touch Robin Williams. In 'What Dreams May Come,' Williams gets plenty of chances to strut his stuff, in a fantasy whose working title might be 'It's a Wonderful Afterlife.'

Early on, the film deals a good metaphysical hand. Observing his own death and funeral, Nielsen is tutored in the ways of the afterlife by a fellow traveler (Cuba Gooding Jr., whose soft ivory sweaters and pants suggest an angel by way of J. Crew). But Nielsen isn't about to go gently into that good night. He vows to be reunited with his wife, even after her suicide delivers her to a personal Hell from which there appears to be no escape.

Heaven, we learn, is spun from our own imaginations, at least until its 'reality' kicks in. For Nielsen, influenced by his love of art, Heaven appears as an impressionist canvas, its idyllic landscapes made of real paint that squishes through his hands and sloshes over his clothes. It's a lovely, fanciful scene.

Nor does God intrude much in this Never-Land. After a gratuitous nod to His presence - "He's probably up there somewhere, saying 'I Love You' and worrying why we can't hear Him," the Gooding Jr. character says - Heaven is revealed as a Self-Help Paradise, whose occupants work through personal flaws and catch loss-fortunate souls. This Puffy Cloud of trendy

psychobabble gets you longing for some old-fashioned, Old Testament tough love: A bolt of lightning from the Big Guy upstairs, or at least a Chuck Heston cameo.

Like that Frank Capra/Jimmy Stewart classic - still among the more reliable litmus tests for an individual's outlook on movies - many viewers will adore this film and dismiss its critics as jaded old grouches. 'What Dreams May Come' is like a goeyly dessert after a six-course meal. Some will crave seconds; others will want to excuse themselves from the table.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

Scheduled to open Friday, Oct. 2 'FIRELIGHT' Exclusively at the Landmark Maple Art Theatre. A Swiss governess being crushed by her father's debts and a British aristocrat desperate for a son strike a deal. He will pay her debt on the condition that she bear his child. The bargain makes a turning point in both of their lives. Stars Sophia Marceau, Stephen Dillane. Scheduled to open Friday, Oct. 2 'THE IMPOSTORS' Comedy about two down-on-their-luck actors who show away on a cruise ship only to find themselves fleeing the flying saucer to enter the fire. Stars Stanley Tucci who wrote and directs. 'LUCY PIGEONS' Exclusively at the Star Southfield. Comedic thriller about a young man who's best friend commits suicide when he finds out his wife is sleeping with him. Stars Vince Vaughn, Joaquin Phoenix. 'ANTZ' Full-length computer animated film about an ant who struggles with the day-to-day drudgery of a world populated by drones. Stars the voice talents of Woody Allen, Danny Glover, Sharon Stone, Sylvester Stallone. 'A NIGHT AT THE ROXBURY' Comedy about the Saturday Night Live Barabrothers, whose one goal in life is to become movie and shakers in L.A.'s ultra-trendy night club scene. Stars Chris Hottel, Neil Patrick Harris, Richard Grieco, and Dan Hedaya. 'WHAT DREAMS MAY COME' Romantic fantasy about two true soul

mates who search for one another in the afterlife. Stars Robin Williams, Cuba Gooding Jr., Annabella Sciorra, Max Von Sydow. 'DEE SNIDER'S STRANGIOLAND' Film about a homicide detective and his partner as they pursue a psychopath who tortures the people he kidnaps by "modifying" their bodies. Stars Dee Snider, Kevin Gage, Brett Harrison, Elizabeth Pena. Scheduled to open Friday, Oct. 9 'PRACTICAL MAGIC' Based on the best-selling novel by Alice Hoffman, a dark and comic fable about two sisters who struggle to use their hereditary gift for guiding fate through practical magic to overcome the obstacles in discovering true love. Stars Sandra Bullock, Nicole Kidman, Dianne Wiest, Stockard Channing. Scheduled to open Friday, Oct. 16 'THE MIGHTY' Based on the acclaimed novel by Rodman Philbrick, a funny, inspiring and adventurous tale of two young outsiders who set off on a mighty "quest." Stars Sharon Stone, Gene Redand. 'PRACTICAL MAGIC' Based on the best-selling novel by Alice Hoffman, a dark and comic fable about two sisters who struggle to use their hereditary gift for guiding fate through

practical magic to overcome the obstacles in discovering true love. Stars Sandra Bullock, Nicole Kidman, Stockard Channing. Scheduled to open Friday, Oct. 23 'APT PUPIL' A dramatic thriller about a high school kid who discovers that his neighbor is an ex-Nazi SS officer and blackmails him. Stars Ian McKellen, Brad Renfro. 'HOME FRIES' An offbeat comedy about two brothers obsessed with the same woman, one wants to marry her, the other to kill her. The trio's lives interweave in unexpected ways that are orchestrated by the brothers' highly eccentric mother. Stars Drew Barrymore, Catherine O'Hara. 'BLAM' Drama about a gifted young rapper/poet who, with help, finds salvation in his art. Stars Saul Williams, Sonja Sohn. 'SOLDIER' An immortal warrior of the future, trained exclusively for combat, but now made obsolete by a new generation of specially bred fighters, defends a band of settlers on a remote planet and discovers his own humanity in the process. Stars Kurt Russell. Scheduled to open Friday, Oct. 30 'CITIZEN KATIE' Exclusively at the Landmark Maple Theatre. A special re-release of the 1941 film that has been acclaimed widely, including most recently by the American Film Institute, as the greatest movie of all time. Stars Orson Welles, who also cop-wrote with Herman Mankiewicz.