MOVIES

'Clay Pigeons' isn't Vince Vaughn's shot at the A-list

BY JON KATZ
SPECIAL WRITER

I don't know anyone who lives in Montana or Utah, but I have a new-found respect for both states. If the producers of "Clay Pigeons" – a dark comedy set in Montana about a redneck nut case Jack the Ripper wannabe – ever asked to film there, the people in charge apparently and wisely turned them away. Down in Utah, they apparently got permission with the proviso that the story remain set in Montana, thereby escaping any identification with this slasher silliness.

First-time writer Matt Healy and first-time director David Dobkin have a friend in high places in respected filmmaker Ridley Scott ("Alien," "Thelma and Louise"), who produced. In this case, that's not what friends are for. But let's move along quickly.

Clay Bidwell (Joaquin Phoenix) is an easygoing gas station attendant out there in Mercer County. We know just how far out it is, because its establishments have names like "Doc Holiday's Tavern," "The Golden Spike Motel" and "Mim's Café." And the sheriff's deputy is named-sit down, now – Barney. Not only that, this one makes Deputy Fife look like Columbo.

That's the comedy part. Before too long, nice guy Clay finds himself under suspicion in the brutal murders of not one, not two, but three local ladies. He protests his innocence, but the insightful sheriff (Scott Wilson) explains, "You're sleeping with one victim, you're dating another and you actually find another. We're a little curious."

Not us. We know who dunnit. It's Lester (Vince "Swingers" Vaughn), that hard drinkin', hard belchin', psychotic laughin' cowboy. And he's got a perfectly reasonable reason for his behavior: "There's some folks out there that need killin'." Well even Shakespeare said something similar about lawyers, but this isn't Shakespeare.

And so, when Lester puts another notch on his knife by adding the town slut (Georgina Cates) to his body count, in rides FBI Agent Shelby (Janeane Garafolo) to put the pieces together – of the mystery, not the bodies.

"Clay Pigeons" will be held up to "Fargo," and deservedly put back down. Whereas the movie citizens of that North Dakota city were comedically quirky, these characters are just plain worthless. As for suspense, there is none, because hero Clay is never in jeopardy. The sheriff is on his side ("He's not the guy"), and we know that Lester's blade only glints for the ladies.

Vince Vaughn is a large screen presence, but he'll have to wait for a better shot at Hollywood's A-List. The late River Phoenix's younger brother Joaquin stretches no acting muscles at all. Versatile Garofalo seems lost entirely, or didn't get enough tips from Jody Foster's "Silence of the Lambs" Agent Starling.

Visual and sound effects are used haphazardly and without purpose, but the inclusion of "It's Now or Never" to score one murder scene is inspired. About the only element that transcends the film is Utah's gorgeous mountain greenery. But then, we're supposed to think it's Montana, aren't we?

BRUCE BERMELIN

Comedic thriller: *Janeane Garofalo (left) and Vince Vaughn star in "Clay Pigeons."*

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

KEN REGAN

Drama: *Oprah Winfrey and Danny Glover star in "Beloved," based on Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel.*

Scheduled to open Friday, Oct. 9

"ONE TOUGH COP"
Drama of a brutal murder and the dilemma a NYPD police officer must face when he is caught between his mob friends and his loyalty to his partner and the force. Stars Stephen Baldwin.

"HOLY MAN"
Comedy about a materialistic program director of a cable shopping network channel is desperate to stimulate sales and save his own job. Stars Eddie Murphy, Kelly Preston.

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, Gena Rowlands.

"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.

"BELOVED"
Based on Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize winning novel about an ex-slave who kills her child, only to have its ghost reappear. Stars Oprah Winfrey, Danny Glover, Thandie Newton, Kimberly Elise.

"BRIDE OF CHUCKY"
In this fourth installment of the series, Chucky hooks up with Tiffany, a doll possessed by the spirit of a "bad" girl. Stars Jennifer Tilly.

Scheduled to open Friday, Oct. 23

"SLAM"
Drama about a gifted young rapper/poet who, with help, finds salvation in his art. Stars Saul Williams, Sonja Sohn.

"SOLDIER"
An itinerant 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 KANE"
Exclusively at the Landmark Maple Theatre. A special reissue 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 co-wrote with Herman Mankiewicz.

"LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL"
Winner of the Grand Jury Prize at the 1998 Cannes Film Festival, a Chaplinesque fable about the power of imagination set against the stark reality of World War II Europe. Stars Roberto Benigni.

Scheduled to open Friday, Nov. 6

"THE SIEGE"
An FBI agent teams up with a mysterious female CIA operative to investigate a group of Middle Eastern terrorists who are bombing New York City targets. As the bombings continue, U.S. troops are deployed and civil liberties are curtailed. Stars Denzel Washington, Annette Bening, Bruce Willis.

"VELVET GOLDMINE"
Set in London in the early '70s during the emergence of the glam-rock scene, the story follows the rise of a mythical rock icon who finds himself at the epicenter of the pleasures and decadence of the day.'

"THE WIZARD OF OZ"
Special edition re-release of the beloved classic on the eve of the film's 60th anniversary.

Scheduled to open Wednesday, Nov. 25

"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 intertwine in unexpected ways that are orchestrated by the brothers' highly eccentric mother. Stars Drew Barrymore, Catherine O'Hara.

THEATER

Hilberry's 'The Mousetrap' is a not-to-be missed mystery

Agatha Christie's "The Mousetrap" runs in rotating repertory through Dec. 3 at the Hilberry Theatre on the campus of Wayne State University. For ticket information, call (313)577-2972 between 11 a.m. and 6 p.m. Monday-Friday.

BY VICTORIA DIAZ
SPECIAL WRITER

To kick off their new season, Detroit's Hilberry Theatre is staging Agatha Christie's venerable murder mystery, "The Mousetrap."

This must mark about the one-billionth performance of the play that opened in London some 46 years ago. But, let me hasten to stress that there is nothing tired or tiresome about this production. With some astute directing by Edward G. Smith (new this year to the Wayne State University theatre faculty), an able cast, and some first-rate production qualities, it's a theatrical experience not to be missed, especially if you're a fan of the classic British whodunit.

A blood-curdling scream on a darkened stage opens the play, signifying (we will later learn) that a murder-most-foul has taken place. We aren't exactly sure who has been killed; more importantly, we don't know who committed the dastardly deed.

As the lights go up, we find ourselves looking in on an English inn called Monkswell manor, run by two rather wide-eyed neophytes, Mollie and Giles Ralston (played with appropriate touches of nervousness and British reserve by Emily Miller and Erik Gratton). Outside, a furious blizzard is worsening. As guests arrive for the evening, we soon discover that the killer intends to strike again. Worse yet, the chosen victim is to be among those snowed in as Monkswell Manor.

The killer, of course, lurks in their midst.

Dame Agatha's crafty dialogue reminds us repeatedly to look beyond surfaces. Nothing may be what it appears. Various characters hide behind various types of "masks." Now and then, genders and sexual preferences are blurry. Names are changed occasionally. Even the food served at dinner is said to be "well-disguised."

Heidi Olsen, as the priggish Mrs. Boyle, seems almost at times to have sprung from an odd comic strip somewhere. (Picture Riverdale High's Miss Grundy gone British, and soured on life in general.) As she comes in from the cold, her body language is so stiff we can practically her bones rattle, and we just know nothing is going to ever thaw her out. Even the prim little hat she wears seems occasionally to simply quiver with righteousness.

Fred Shahadi (complete with the world's silliest Italian accent) seems aptly cast as the rouged and powdered Paravicini; Lucas Caleb Rooney is a tight-jawed, teddy bearish Major Metcalf. Cat Shoemaker's Miss Casewell appears a bundle of energy – vibrant and slightly tough.

Tall/dark/good-looking Matt Troyer is utterly charming as the nail-biting, giggly Christopher Wren, making his colorful character both amusing and faintly touching at the same time. This is the actor's third year with the repertory company, and it shows. He seems perfectly assured in his role, and is a fascinating performer to watch, not just when he's delivering his own lines, but when he's reacting to those around him.

As the determined Detective Sgt. Trotter, David Engelman (also marking his third year with the company) could hardly be more impressive. An actor from Michigan, he seems created to play the lead role of this intense Englishman with the Cockney-flavored speech. From the time he first appears onstage, he is absolutely convincing, so that we are caught up even more in the fast-paced drama and growing suspense.

Scenery by Larry Kaushansky and lighting by Thomas H. Schraeder are outstanding.