

'Virgin Suicides' looks at bleak matter with beauty

BY STEPHANIE ANGELYN CASOLA
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With a title like "The Virgin Suicides," movie-goers may have a tendency to cringe, rather than embrace the directorial debut by Sofia Coppola. But judging by this poignant work, she seems poised to follow in her father's famous footsteps.

"The Virgin Suicides" offers a disturbingly beautiful look at five fair-haired sisters crushed beneath the strong-hold of a domineering mother and weak-willed father. Set among the lush tree-lined streets of Grosse Pointe in the mid 1970s, the film welcomes viewers into the Lisbon home. Mr. Lisbon, a math

teacher (James Woods) and his wife (Kathleen Turner) keep a tight lock on its doors, and it's that stifling climate that ultimately leads to tragedy.

"Cecilia was the first to go," says the narrated voice (Giovanni Ribisi) in the opening line. The first, youngest and most delicate of the five girls, she was literally dying for freedom. You can hear it through the wandering voices of neighbors: "That girl wanted out of that house." Cecilia, 13 (Hanna Hall), Lux, 14 (Kirsten Dunst), Bonnie, 15 (Chelsea Swain), Mary, 16 (A.J. Cook) and Therese, 17 (Leslie Hayman) are the Lisbon sisters, all trapped by the conventions of

their upper-middle class family. But the film isn't about suicide, as much as it is about the life they left behind. Dealing with issues of repression, longing, sex and death, Coppola somehow paints a soft portrait of the beauty in life while exploring – in the most profound manner – the simple question of why.

Rather than a public service announcement against suicide the film comments on how society can easily crush and overwhelm the innocence of life with its rules, expectations and fears. Told through the eyes of four young boys obsessed with the enchanting Lisbon girls, "The Virgin Suicides," flashes back to

a time when the automotive industry hit a lull and the air was ripe with adolescent curiosities. Young Tim Weiner (Jonathan Tucker) leads his friends in pursuing the mystery. The girls growing entrapment is represented symbolically through the oak trees which are cut down in the Lisbon's front yard. Parkers officials insist they are diseased; that if the trees aren't cut down, the disease will spread.

But the disease that began with Cecilia did spread throughout the home. The boys can only collect pieces of the Lisbon girls – lipstick, a diary, postcards – and try to fit them together to make sense of the events that destroyed their fantasies and an entire family.

James Woods gave a fabulous performance as the understated, devastated father who retreats into his collectable war planes and television ball games. Kathleen Turner is chilling as the overbearing, nervous-minded mother. Her plight is described through the words of a whispering neighbor "You always wonder if there was something you could've done."

Danny DeVito, Michael Pare and Scott Glenn make notable cameo appearances in the film. But its true impact lies in its young, and somewhat unknown, cast. Josh Hartnett portrays Trip Fontaine, the footfall hero everyone wants to date – everyone except Lux. Jonathan Tucker and Anthony DeSimeone portray Tim and Chase, the wide eyes through which this story is told.

James Woods gave a fabulous



The Lisbon girls: Chelsea Swain, Kirsten Dunst, Leslie Hayman and A.J. Cook star in *The Virgin Suicides*.

make a seamless film. The deaths are jarringly without offering an explicit look at the aftermath.

With an original score by Air and a soundtrack packed with Todd Rundgren and Heart, "The Virgin Suicides" transforms Jeffrey Eugenides' novel of the same name into a hauntingly beautiful film bound to be remembered come Oscar time.

'Gladiator' recreates ancient Rome

BY JON KATZ
SPECIAL WRITER

The Roman Empire, circa A.D. 180, was apparently run less like an empire and more like a family business. Sort of a Caesar and Son Inc.

"Gladiator," an epic on a scale rarely seen in four decades, is at its core the story of Son being passed over in favor of the hired help. Put into local perspective, imagine if Richard Gordan had been told by his father that one of the optometrists, not him, was going to take over D.O.C.

"You are the son I should have had," aging Emperor Marcus Aurelius (Richard Harris) tells General Maximus (Russell Crowe). When spied and cowardly Commander (Joaquin Phoenix) gets wind of Pater's plan, he does the old man in and bores his way onto the throne, ordering the execution of Maximus, his wife and son. Escaping his assassins, Maximus is caught by slaves and shipped to a training school for gladiators. There he vows to return to Rome, take his revenge on Commodus and fulfill Aurelius' dream of restoring the empire to the will of the people.

Lifting whole chapters from "Spartacus" and "Ben-Hur," "Gladiator" is nevertheless a major legeon of its own, thanks to bravura performances by Crowe and Phoenix and "Titanic"-like direction by Ridley Scott.

With computer graphic imaging, the kind that gave us the *Titanic* and its 2000 passengers and crew, "Gladiator" rebuilt



Epic story:
Russell Crowe fights the good fight in "Gladiator," directed by Ridley Scott.

ancient Rome and put 35,000 cheering citizens into the Colosseum. Chilling overhead shots of the city give one the feeling of being in a helicopter time machine.

Yet for all its bigness, New Zealander Russell Crowe ("The Insider") fills his armor with a hero's heart and the physique to fit it. His Maximus is a family man; he doesn't seek the power offered to him, asking only to return home after years of war. Put a sword in his hand, however, and heads will roll along with a plethora of other body parts.

In his final screen role, the late Oliver Reed plays the sympathetic gladiator procurer, the same role and with some shamelessly similar lines for which Peter Ustinov won an Oscar in "Spartacus." Reed died weeks before the end of shooting.

"Gladiator" is rated R for its graphic fight scenes.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

Scheduled to open Friday, May 12

THE BIG KAHUNA
Contemporary drama tells of life on the road. Three determined industrial lubricant salesmen try to land the largest account of their lives, but only one is invited to a key convention where they can make their move. Stars Kevin Spacey, Danny DeVito and Peter Fonda.

BEYOND EARTH
Adaptation of Ron Hubbard's sci-fi novel in which 10-foot aliens have taken over the world and forced humans to live underground. Stars John Travolta as the alien overlord of the conquered Earth.

HAMLET
Ethan Hawke plays a brooding filmmaker and heir to the Demark Corporation in this modern version of the Shakespearean tragedy set in New York City.

HUMAN TRAFFIC
British sex comedy about five friends who spend an intense weekend together. Stars John Simm, Shaun Parkes, Danny Dyer, Nicole Reynolds and Andrew Lincoln. Written and directed by Justin Kenrigan.

THE LAST SARDINER
Set in 1920s, a poetic portrait of the final days of British rule in Ireland. Stars Maggie Smith, Michael Gambon, Keely Hawes, David Tennant and Jan Birkin.

HELD UP
Comedy stars Jamie Foxx and Nia Long as a couple enjoying their vacation through the Grand Canyon State. Foxx's bad luck begins when his fiance leaves, his car is stolen and he's taken hostage at a convenience store. Also stars Barry Corbin, John Caleen, Jake Bussey and Sarah Faulson.

SCREWED
Norm McDonald is a disgruntled, under-appreciated chauffeur who seeks revenge on his employer, a rich bald man (John Goodman), David Chappelle. Their plot-proof plan, kidnapping his boss' dog for ransom, backfires in their face — leaving his boss under the impression that her chauffeur has been kidnapped, rather than her dog.

ENDOMM
Romantic comedy about five friends who are always taken advantage of, in love and gather the courage to turn the tables. Stars Jason Biggs and Mena Suvari.

KIKUJU
Touching story of a boy who befriends a hoodlum named Kikuju. A film about self-discovery with comic tendencies. Directed by and starring Takeshi Kitano. Shown at the Detroit Film Theatre May 12-14.

LES BOHÈMES FEMMES
Claude Chabrol's 1960 crime film about four Parisienne girls who work at the same neighborhood store. Showing at the Detroit Film Theatre 7:30 p.m. Monday, May 15.

Scheduled to open Friday, May 19

DINOSAUR
The full-length computer-animated fantasy tells the story of a dinosaur, separated from his family at birth, who is raised by monkeys. Following an asteroid hit on earth, he is reunited with his family, saving their lives using the knowledge he learned from the monkeys.

LOSER
Romantic comedy in which two college students who are always taken advantage of, in love and gather the courage to turn the tables. Stars Jason

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