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ANALYZE THAT* and *EMPIRE

It's enough to make a grown movie-critic weep: You rave about *Solaris*, a science-fiction work that's psychologically rich, challenging, and incredibly unusual, and you read in the paper that the audience-tracking firm Cinemascore has ranked it the most universally loathed major release in 20 years. You check out the top-10 list from the National Board of Review, the first organization to hand out year-end kudos, and realize that only one of those 10 films has (as yet) made it to the Quad Cities, and *that* one only stayed for a week at Moline's Nova 6 Cinemas. And you eagerly look forward to a December weekend of new releases – surely some of those terrific-looking titles will finally appear? – and your only options are *Analyze That* and *Empire*.

For a while, you might find yourself believing that *Analyze That* (the sequel, of course, to 1999's comedy smash *Analyze This*) will top its predecessor's laugh quotient; gone is the protracted let's-get-Robert De Niro-in-therapy setup, the forced romantic byplay between Billy Crystal and Lisa Kudrow, and the momentum-draining presence of Chazz Palminteri. In their place, we're given the comically promising notion of De Niro's Mafia leader going straight and serving as technical advisor for a mobster-themed TV drama (though there are nagging echoes to De Niro's work in this year's awful buddy comedy *Showtime*), where De Niro is outraged that the show's New York hoodlum is being played by an Australian with a pitch-perfect accent (Anthony LaPaglia, in a brilliant piece of casting). The movie also features an enjoyably flamboyant turn by Reg Rogers as the TV show's frazzled director, and Scorsese fans will thrill to seeing De Niro reunited with Cathy Moriarty, who played Vickie to De Niro's Jake LaMotta in *Raging Bull*; this time, Moriarty gets to slap *De Niro* down.

It doesn't take long, though, for the film's inspiration to completely dry up. Soon enough, *Analyze That* degenerates into a series of generic mobster gags, *faux* sentimental moments in which De Niro and Crystal weep over their departed fathers, and shoot-'em-ups between warring families in which you can't tell who is on whose side and don't much care. Harold Ramis' direction is sadly uninspired this time around – there's nothing here to match the original's hysterical *Godfather* parody – and De Niro and Crystal are so predictable in their tough-guy/meek-shrink badinage that their squabbling has no surprise and provides precious few yuks. In the end, *Analyze That* reminds you of nothing so much as *Men in Black II*, a sequel that provides exactly what the original did ... and much less.

The film is still preferable, though, to *Empire*, which ridiculously panders to its core audience by showing that the sins of a drug-dealing killer are petty compared to the sins of unethical Wall Street financiers. John Leguizamo plays the film's "heroic" dealer whom I guess we're supposed to admire because, even though he has a propensity for shooting people in the head, he *really* loves his girlfriend; Peter Sarsgaard, who appears to have been taking James Spader injections, is the preppie slime whom we're supposed to hate because he steals the money Leguizamo "earned" via murder and drugs. Am I missing something here? Yes, Leguizamo and Sarsgaard both get their just desserts by the finale, but there's no denying that writer/director Franc Reyes is getting off on all this abhorrent behavior; the movie only pretends to have a soul. Once you get past the movie's atrocious acting, banal romantic interludes, and sloppy construction – Reyes spends an inordinate amount of early screen time establishing the milieu of *Empire*'s drug world and then systematically ignores it – abhorrent behavior is all you have left; you know a movie's in serious trouble when Denise Richards, playing Sarsgaard's girlfriend, *isn't* the most embarrassing element in it.

RECENT VIDEO RELEASES

And so we cinephiles continue our wait for topnotch entertainment, and hit the local video chain for some 2002 titles we probably missed. Thankfully, there are some fine works out there worth catching up on. Best of the lot is Jill Sprecher's *13 Conversations About One Thing*, the National Board of Review finalist that made a brief appearance during Nova 6's autumnal art-film series. All about the roles that fate and chance play in our lives, the movie is a beautiful, kaleidoscopic interweaving of characters and events, it plays delightful tricks with time, and it gives actors such as Matthew McConaughey, Clea Duvall, and especially Alan Arkin some of the strongest material of their careers. Depending on your frame of mind,
13 Conversations
is either incredibly depressing or incredibly life-affirming; it's a rare cinematic work indeed that can make that claim. The film is sure to merit repeat viewings, and director/co-writer Sprecher – who also created 1998's memorable
Clockwatchers
– is a talent to watch.

Nearly as good is the latest John Sayles work, *Sunshine State*, which is a *Nashville*-esque look at a beachside Florida community upturned by the arrival of land developers. Sayles has never had much style as a filmmaker – his staging is static to the point of lethargy – but he writes marvelous dialogue, loose and good-natured, and best of all, he
loves
actors. Edie Falco gives her first screen performance that's on a par with her brilliant work on
The Sopranos
, and actors such as Timothy Hutton, Mary Steenburgen, Mary Alice, Jane Alexander, Ralph Waite, Alan King, James McDaniel, and Gordon Clapp all chomp on their roles with vigor. (Only the strident Angela Bassett is a disappointment.)
Sunshine State
isn't much to look at, but the writing and performers keep it thoroughly entertaining.

The performers all also the main reason to catch the *Stand by Me*-ish movie *The Dangerous*

Lives of Altar Boys
, in which young actors Emile Hirsch, Kieran Culkin, and Jena Malone give the sort of nuanced performances that veterans twice their age should envy, and
Lovely & Amazing
, in which one of those dreaded, female-bonding, we're-self-centered-and-neurotic-so-love-us scripts is given considerable charm and gravitas by Brenda Blethyn, Catherine Keener, and Emily Mortimer; the movie itself is neither lovely nor amazing, but these three actresses certainly are. However, for a textbook example of how a wonderful cast in sensational material can
still
make you want to kill yourself, I present Oliver Parker's 2002 adaptation of
The Importance of Being Earnest
, a movie so grossly overstaged and inappropriately proud of itself that Oscar Wilde's classic comedy of manners is left a shambles; its degrading lack of subtlety is less elbow-in-the-ribs as
sledgehammer
-in-the-ribs. Among the injured parties are Rupert Everett, Colin Firth, Frances O'Connor, Tom Wilkinson, and Reese Witherspoon, all of whom are wildly misdirected, and amazingly, Judi Dench fares even worse; Lady Bracknell is one of the theatre's great, hilarious caricatures, and
this
is the role Parker chooses to present realistically? Of all recent video releases,
Earnest
would appear the most foolproof entertainment, but Parker crosses the line from foolproof to fool
ish
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