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IN THE CUT

Jane Campion’s erotic thriller *In the Cut* is, for the most part, an unholy mess, but as messes go, it’s certainly one of 2003’s more intriguing ones.

Based on Susanna Moore’s 1995 novel, the film features Meg Ryan as Franny Avery, a depressed, wary New York schoolteacher who, near the beginning of the film, is interrogated by a gruff homicide detective named Malloy (Mark Ruffalo). Franny might have been the last person to see a serial killer’s latest victim alive, and as she learns about the case, and as Malloy and Franny enter into an obsessive sexual relationship, Franny begins to suspect the detective himself of being the murderer. This is the basic plotline for *Jagged Edge* and a thousand soft-core, late-night-on-cable-TV movies, and as a work of this type,
In the Cut
just doesn’t cut it. The plotting borders on the incoherent, with more contrivances and coincidences than the genre can stand, and the ending is a real botch; it requires Franny to be so criminally stupid that any goodwill built toward her – which isn’t much in the first place – is completely trashed. And with the exception of Jennifer Jason Leigh’s scenes as Franny’s half-sister, the film has no lighter moments, and therefore no variety;
In the Cut
is an exercise in dread, and it doesn’t give audiences anything in the way of a good time. However, you can’t say it’s badly made. Jane Campion doesn’t seem much interested in the film as a thriller, yet she uses the elements of thrillers to explore one of her favorite themes – the victimization of women – and creates something disturbing and edgy; the movie doesn’t work, but it’s hard to shake out of your mind.

Campion’s stylistic flourishes can be off-putting – the critic Pauline Kael once commented, in reference to *The Piano*, “The symbolism never really registers fully, because you can’t tell what she’s symbolizing, though you know damn well it’s symbolic” – and when, in
In the Cut
, she calls attention to an obscene floral arrangement or Franny’s dream of her parents’ courtship, you have to fight the urge to say,
“Huh?”
But Campion is certainly gifted. She explores women’s attitudes – about sexual desire, about dissatisfaction, about the fear of and desire for men – in a way that very few of her contemporaries do, and she’s not afraid to make her leading characters’ motives unclear or

unlikable; her characters, and her films (like them or not), get under your skin. Campion also knows how to make a fiercely controlled, methodical movie that’s almost never boring; *In the Cut* is slow but restless, like a panther that might or might not strike. At first, it might seem like Meg Ryan’s not doing much of anything, but as the film progresses, her remote portrayal transforms into a that of a woman almost paralyzed by fear yet unable to run; it’s a brave piece of acting, and she’s matched well with Ruffalo’s frightening, insinuating detective. Since it fails on so many basic levels, I can’t exactly recommend *In the Cut*, but having seen it once, I’m actually curious to view it again.

BEYOND BORDERS

For most critics, Martin Campbell’s *Beyond Borders*, which uses some of our planet’s more war-torn and ravaged nations as backdrop, is beyond reprehensible. The movie, after all, is a star-crossed romance featuring two impossibly beautiful performers who smolder intensely while, occasionally, aiding the needy in Ethiopia and Cambodia and Chechnya; it’s a white liberal’s fantasy about being able to help the oppressed and get laid at the same time. So, no, I can’t really argue with those who find the film offensive – personally, I was offended at the filmmakers’ use of CGI to create a starving Ethiopian child – but the movie is so gripping and skillfully presented that, for two hours at least, you can put your moral qualms on hold and enjoy the movie for the old-fashioned cheese it is. As a socialite who finally puts her mouth where her money is by joining a humanitarian relief effort, Angelina Jolie gives her most honest performance in ages, and Clive Owen is pretty extraordinary; playing a radical relief worker with no time for bureaucracy, he’s a dream of a leading man, so passionate and direct that it makes perfect sense for Jolie’s character to abandon husband and children to follow him around the world. Director Campbell can’t do much to enliven the pair’s dull romantic clinches, but he photographs his stars lovingly, and pulls off some shockingly tense action set pieces, including one involving an infant and a hand grenade that made the audience – all nine of us – gasp. *Beyond Borders* doesn’t come close to equaling some of the masterpieces of its genre – *Dr. Zhivago*, *The English Patient* – yet it’s entertaining and sometimes even moving; after all the bad press the film has received,

you might be amazed to discover how much it *doesn’t* suck.

BUFFALO SOLDIERS

It says something about our times that, had it been made some 30 years ago, the black comedy *Buffalo Soldiers* would probably have become a huge counterculture hit, playing at college campuses all across the country, and in 2003 – after being shelved for more than two years – hardly anyone has seen it at all. (It’s currently playing at the Brew & View after appearing, briefly, in larger markets this past summer.) Like Altman’s *M*A*S*H*, Gregor Jordan’s film looks at the American military cynically, ironically, and it hardly needs to be said that our current political climate isn’t exactly hospitable to a work of this nature. That’s a shame, because *Buffalo Soldiers* is fantastic, a pungent, often hilarious satire of American malaise in peacetime. Taking place in 1989, as the Berlin Wall is crumbling, the film centers on an American Army supplier (Joaquin Phoenix) in Germany who bides his time supplying drugs and firearms to the Germans, and it’s a shockingly funny and surprisingly astute portrait of some of our worst masquerading as our best. The best thing about small, relatively unheralded works like *Buffalo Soldiers* is that, unlike movies endlessly trumpeted in the media, surprises abound; in deference to Jordan’s wonderful work, I’ll not spoil them. Suffice it to say that Phoenix plays the antihero with an intoxicating deviltry, Ed Harris does some of the funniest, most relaxed work of his career (he’s playing something rare in the Harris *oeuvre* – someone who’s not smart), Scott Glenn is intimidating as hell, Anna Paquin adds to her astonishing résumé as Glenn’s scarred and mischievous daughter, the plot unfolds with confident, gutsy bravado, and numerous scenes – including the early disposal of a soldier’s body and a fiery tank run amok – rank with the year’s absolute funniest. You might not have heard of *Buffalo Soldiers*, but it’s one you won’t want to miss.