APOCALYPSE LATER

THE FIRST THIRTY

NICOLAS CAGE

APOCALYPSE LATER

ZINE

ISSUE #6

APOCALYPSE LATER BOOKS
BY HAL C. F. ASTELL

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APOCALYPSE LATER ZINE #6

THE FIRST THIRTY

FILM RUNTHROUGH
NICOLAS CAGE

BY HAL C. F. ASTELL

APOCALYPSE LATER

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My First Thirty reviews have generated a lot of buzz and I thank everyone for chiming in with their comments. Some of you know a couple of Nicolas Cage's bigger films. Some of you know his more outrageous pictures. Some of you have even seen a lot more of his work than I have. I cherish all your thoughts.

I hope you all join me for further First Thirties. I'll be posting each review to Apocalypse Later Film as I go and sharing them on social media. Right now that's Facebook, Instagram, Tribel and Twitter. And next up for me is the First Thirty of Pam Grier!

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the my first First Thirty! This is me satisfying a couple of different urges.

For one, Apocalypse Later began as a film blog, Apocalypse Later Film, and, while that worked out really well, leading me into writing books about film, it backfired a little too because I'd found a vague template for my film reviews at over 2,000 words a pop and I just didn't have the time to write that much about films that weren't going to make it into one of my books.

And that only got worse as I started to write book reviews for the Nameless Zine and later rock and metal albums for Apocalypse Later Music. I have to sleep at some point, right?

So I've been trying for a while to figure out how to get a better balance between my reviews of films, books and music and, in large part, that's where this zine comes in, with each quarter being taken up by one issue focused on each medium. The reviews are shorter (for me) and they flow a lot easier.

The other is that I've long looked at certain filmmakers from the angle of wanting to know how they got to where they are today. Actors especially make a lot of films and we tend to see the big ones or the mainstream ones or the well marketed ones. The clues to how any particular actor found their style and travelled the road from obscure potential to recognisable name to big A-list star is in *all* the films they made, not just those obvious ones.

Enter the First Thirty. In these issues of the zine—and I plan to write three of these each year, with the fourth film zine being a different look back at the year in film a century earlier—I'll be watching the first thirty films of one particular talent, writing them all up with focused screen grabs and seeing what sort of journey they take me on.

First up is Nicolas Cage, a polarising figure in the film industry but a fascinating one. He started out someone, given that his real surname is Coppola, so it would seem to be easy to hurl the old insult of nepotism at him, but he chose to walk away from that, to make it on his talent instead of his name. So, after a few films, he became Nicolas Cage, showing up to auditions without Coppola anywhere on his paperwork. Eventually, of course, everyone knew and it didn't hurt that he did a few films for his famous uncle, Francis Ford Coppola.

However, those easy hires aside, he didn't have an easy ride and his First Thirty is a rise, fall, rise that ends at a pivotal moment. What you'll find here is that he started out in a failed TV pilot; had zero lines a long way down the credits in a famous film; landed a lead role of his own; paid his dues in supporting slots on a string of movies, often prominently; temporarily hit the big time with a couple of big films in the same year; shifted very deliberately sideways to make indie films that allowed him to do interesting things; found himself lost and struggling to both find his own voice and become relevant again; won a well-deserved Oscar out of nowhere; and finally figured out what would work for both him and the audience right at the end of his First Thirty.

Watching all this in a three month span was quite a ride. I'm glad you took it with me.

— Hal C. F. Astell, March 2023

The Best of Times

The Best of Times

THE BEST OF TIMES (1981)

DIRECTOR: DON MISCHER

WRITERS: BOB ARNOTT, CAROL HATFIELD & LANE SARASOHN

STARS: CRISPIN GLOVER, JILL SCHOELEN, NICOLAS COPPOLA, JULIE PIEKARSKI, KEVIN CORTES, LISA HOPE ROSS, DAVID RAMBO, JANET ROBIN

First up for Nicolas Cage was this failed TV pilot that I'm sure he, and the rest of the cast, would be happy to see vanished away into the black hole that contains most other failed TV pilots. It's called *The Best of Times* and it was brought to the unwary people of America by Squeezably Soft Charmin. The jokes really do write themselves but I'll try to behave.

Initially, it feels like a sitcom, with its half-hearted laughtrack and sound effects, but it's also a sketch show and a musical. It also feels a lot longer than its sixty minute running time less commercials.

However, it's a fascinating piece of video for bringing us crazy young versions of a number of people we know well nowadays. Cage, still going by Nicolas Coppola, is one of them, but he isn't the only one or even the primary one. The star here is nominally Crispin Glover, who seems eager to play a normal young man, the one part that he clearly doesn't understand how to play. It could be said that his character seems to be an alien pretending to be a human being without any understanding of what that is. He clearly hasn't grown into himself.

This show would have us think that the best of times are those when we're kids but soon to become adults. Crispin is a high school student living with his mum—played by Betty Glover, his actual mum—and his friends, who also go by their real first names, are likewise. But they won't be in school for long. They're about to graduate and theoretically grow up and this is all about that awkward moment when we're supposed to learn who we really are.

Now, whatever you're picturing from that is not remotely as embarrassing as this turns out to be. For everyone involved. Including us.

Let me introduce you to Crispin's friends, a cast of characters who aren't at all likely to be friends in real life, because they represent the various stereotypes of high school.

Nicolas Coppola plays Nick, the jock. He may live on the beach where he works out all the time. He never stops moving and he's in pretty good shape, which we see because he's dressed only in denim shorts. He does one armed press ups, punches the air and even joins in on an ensemble musical number at a car wash doing Dolly Parton's *9 to 5*, clad in denim dungarees like a surfer dude hillbilly redneck cannibal.

Kevin Cortes is Kevin, the nerd. Most think he looks like John Denver, which he does, but that doesn't get him dates. He spends all of his time on payphones asking girls to go to the dance with him, but the only one who says yes is ten years old. He even asks the operator.

Julie Piekarski is Julie, the cheerleader and popular chick who lives for compatibility lists in teenage magazines, which is supposed to be why she's not with Kevin.

David Rambo is David, the dork, who works

as a stock boy at the local grocery store, where all these kids hang out, because the budget is not up to shooting in a mall. The store is run by Special Guest Star Jackie Mason as O'Reilly, the only adult with a role of substance, which translates to him dishing out a barrage of New York Jewish dad jokes and little else.

Lisa Hope Ross is Lisa, the fitness aficionado comic relief who eats after she runs, so she looks rather like a chunky Marcy D'Arcy.

Jill Schoelen is Jill, the glamour girl, who has quite a habit of turning any scene into what seems like an audition for a commercial.

Janet Robin is Janet, the muso, who wants to be in the band, as pitiful as it is, but they only take her on as their roadie.

Yeah, that's quite the list and I wonder how many of those names you recognise. Cage, of course, and probably Glover too. Maybe you're aware of Julie Piekarski from her role early on in *The Facts of Life*.

However, Jill Schoelen would go on to be a scream queen in a succession of horror movies such as *Chiller*, *The Stepfather* and *Cutting Class*, Brad Pitt's debut. David Rambo would become a playwright, scriptwriter and producer with a string of credits to his name—that's him in the credits to *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*. And Janet Robin was a real guitarist, who would go to belong to excellent all-girl band Precious Metal and tour with Lindsey Buckingham and Air Supply.

So there's no doubt the talent is here. Even Kevin Cortes and Lisa Hope Ross, who would go on to nothing else, are decent. The problem—well, problems, plural—isn't with the talent. It's with pretty much everything else.

For one, this is massively dated, even for a decade that lends itself to being dated. It's not just the fashion either, though is that Crispin Glover wearing rainbow suspenders? It sure looks like it, even if it's hard to tell on a crappy VHS rip. These kids hang out in arcades. Kevin is always on a pay phone. Lisa is thrilled to have a letter to the editor printed in the *TV Guide*.

For another, the tone shifts wilder than you might ever imagine. One minute, it's all fourth wall breaking confessional, every one of these characters pouring their teenage hearts out to us like we're a diary, even asking us questions. Then it's a sketch show with weak sight gags like Nick the paper boy throwing a newspaper over an entire house, Lisa spraying herself in the face with a garden hose or Jackie Mason doing the robot.

Then it gets abruptly serious. Cage gets the most serious, late on when he suddenly panics about imminent war in El Salvador, to which he expects to be drafted. It actually works, as overdone as it is. It's the one section of this entire film that's worth keeping for an early talent reel.

Surely Cage would want to forget his advice to Kevin about picking up girls though. "That's what turns women on," he explains, while he flexes muscles. "I am the most beautiful man you have ever seen. My magnificent biceps drive you wild with desire."

But hey, he got the career, and even though this plays out as if a bunch of friends at the Beverly Hills High School with connections to the industry managed to get a pilot greenlit, shot and broadcast just to shut them up.

And it is as bad as that suggests.

At Ridgemont High
Only the Rules get Busted!
FAST TIMES
AT RIDGEMONT HIGH
It's Awesome, Totally Awesome!
A REFUGEE FILMS Production An AMY HECKERLING Film "FAST TIMES AT RIDGEMONT HIGH"
SEAN PENN JENNIFER JASON LEIGH JUDGE REINHOLD PHOEBE CATES BRIAN BACKER
ROBERT ROMANUS and RAY WALSTON Screenplay by CAMERON CROWE Based on the book by CAMERON CROWE
Executive Producer C.O. ERICKSON Produced by ART LINSON and IRVING AZOFF Directed by AMY HECKERLING
R
RESTRICTED
Soundtrack available on FULL MOON/ASYLUM Records and tapes
Read the SIMON and SCHUSTER Book
A UNIVERSAL Picture
Featuring the Music of JACKSON BROWNE • JIMMY BUFFETT • DON FELDER • THE GO-GO'S • LOUISE GOFFIN
SAMMY HAGAR • DON HENLEY • GERARD McMAHON • GRAHAM NASH • STEVIE NICKS • OINGO BOINGO • PALMER/JOST
POCO • QUARTERFLASH • RAVYNS • TIMOTHY B. SCHMIT • BILLY SQUIER • DONNA SUMMER • JOE WALSH
PRINTED IN U.S.A.
N.S.S. #820109

FAST TIMES AT RIDGEMONT HIGH (1982)

DIRECTOR: AMY HECKERLING

WRITER: CAMERON CROWE, FROM HIS BOOK

STARS: SEAN PENN, JENNIFER JASON LEIGH, JUDGE REINHOLD, PHOEBE CATES, BRIAN BACKER, ROBERT ROMANUS AND RAY WALSTON

I've seen *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* before, but not as often as you might expect because I'm British. This wasn't the pivotal cinematic representation of my youth the way it was so many of my American friends.

Initially, it feels like it wants to do the same thing as *The Best of Times* but in our reality. It's another film with a young ensemble cast who are coming of age, the token adult this time being Ray Walston, best known until this point for *My Favorite Martian* but now best known for playing Mr. Hand, nemesis of Jeff Spicoli.

But it feels vulgar not safe, film not TV, real not fake. Sure, it does that with far more relish than was needed, but it makes its point. After all, *The Best of Times* knows that kids about to be adults haven't even heard of sex. *Fast Times* knows that they don't think about anything else. Well, maybe Van Halen tickets. Or weed.

The first people we see are happily looking at other people's asses. Underage girls chat about when they lost their virginity. Spicoli's bedroom walls and locker are covered in porn. Phoebe Cates teaches Jennifer Jason Leigh how to give a blowjob. At school. In the cafeteria. Using a carrot.

It doesn't take long to get serious, because Leigh, as Stacy Hamilton, is a fifteen year old who climbs out of her bedroom window to go on a date with a twenty-six year old man. She pretends to be nineteen, so don't jump to the wrong conclusions. However, everything else unfolds exactly as you expect. It's painful. It's not glamorous. He doesn't call. No, he doesn't knock her up, but the next guy does and that means an abortion scene that her parents are not supposed to know about.

Roger Ebert hated this movie and I wonder if he changed his mind over time. When it was new, he saw it as another gross-out teen sex comedy, which isn't unfair, but he found the serious parts out of place, given that context.

Why it works so well for me is that it's both a gross-out teen sex comedy and a serious look at coming of age in America in 1982 because it should have been both.

Some kids were absolutely having the time of their lives, getting laid every night by their dream partners, falling out of the marijuana smoke inside their VW vans, driving cool cars and earning a fortune at All American Burger.

But some kids weren't.

Some kids were losing their jobs, getting dumped, having terrible sexual experiences, discovering that their partners had cheated on them and needing abortions.

It's fair to say that *Fast Times* acknowledges both and I don't see that as a bad thing.

Given the quality of *The Best of Times*, or the lack of it, it's not surprising to discover that

Nicolas Cage's name does not show up before the title. Top billed is Sean Penn, who had also debuted a year earlier, in *Taps*, not as the star but ahead of Tom Cruise. He's the most overtly memorable character and my favourite scene has to be the one where he has pizza delivered to his history class with Mr. Hand.

The most important characters to the film are played by Leigh and Brian Backer, as a pair of eager but awkward young things, Stacy and Mark, who go through quite a soap opera over their sophomore year at high school. Both are exactly what the roles needed.

Both Stacy and Mark have an older friend to give them advice. Initially it seems that these experienced confidantes, Linda and Mike, are comparative experts but, eventually, we learn —as do the kids—that they aren't wiser at all, just older. As Linda, Cates is an absolute dream —and the scene in which she's precisely that for Stacy's older brother Brad, is breathtaking —and Robert Romanus is excellent too.

Other prominent actors in supporting roles early in their careers include Judge Reinhold, as Brad, who's given a whole narrative arc of his own, and Forest Whitaker as a star football player, who mostly serves as a key side story to Spicoli's arc. Both are excellent and it's in their stories that we get a glimpse of Nicolas Cage, again credited under his real name of Nicolas Coppola.

And glimpse is certainly the most accurate word to use there, because, even though he's given two scenes, both are so short that you would miss them if you blink.

The first is during a pivotal scene for Brad, who's living it up in high school. He's doing well at All American Burger, where he's their Employee of the Month; he's about to pay off his 1960 Buick LeSabre, which he drives with overt pride, and he has a cute girlfriend, even if he plans to dump her so that he can be the eligible bachelor in senior year. And then it all goes horribly wrong for him, when he insults a complaining customer. Look behind him and you'll see Michael Wyle and Nicolas Cage as a pair of colleagues watching him get fired.

The second happens during a football game. Whitaker is Charles Jefferson, who's huge for his age, and Spicoli has befriended his younger brother, who lets him drive Charles's beloved 1979 Chevy Camaro. After he crashes this in a memorable scene, he promises to get it fixed but instead sets it up to appear that it was trashed by fans of Ridgemont's rival, Lincoln High School. Whitaker is brutal in their match and wins the game almost single-handed. Up there in the bleachers, applauding him on, is a briefly seen Nicolas Cage.

At the time, Reinhold believed it was his big break. "I thought my career would really take off after that role. Instead Sean's career took off." It was a huge boost for Penn and Cates, as well as for others, but Cage wasn't one.

While entire books could be written about this film—starting with the fact that it was an adaptation of one, which *Rolling Stone* editor Cameron Crowe wrote about the year that he spent undercover as a student at Clairemont High School in San Diego—there's not much more to be said about Cage's part in it.

He doesn't speak and he's easy to miss and, as successful as the picture was—initially, and over time, as it grew into something that few involved expected—that success had nothing to do with him and had no part in spurring his career onward.

That break would come next, in whichever film we count as being next.

T-12
T-12
T-12
T-12
T-12

VALLEY GIRL
She's cool.
He's hot.
She's from the Valley.
He's not.
HOLLYWOOD
GALLERIA
VALLEY 9000 PRODUCTIONS PRESENTS VALLEY GIRL WITH NICOLAS CAGE, DEBORAH FOREMAN, ELIZABETH DAILY, CAMERON DYE, MICHELLE MEYRINK. AND STARRING LEE PURCELL, RICHARD SANDERS, COLLEEN CAMP AND FREDERIC FORREST.
WRITTEN BY ANDREW LANE AND WAYNE CRAWFORD. DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY FREDERICK ELMES. SPECIAL MUSICAL APPEARANCES BY "JOSIE COTTON" AND THE "PLIMSOULS."
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS THOMAS COLEMAN AND MICHAEL ROSENBLATT. PRODUCED BY WAYNE CRAWFORD AND ANDREW LANE. DIRECTED BY MARTHA COOLIDGE.
SOUNDTRACK AVAILABLE ON EPIC RECORDS AND TAPES 1982 © VALLEY 9000 PRODUCTIONS, INC FROM AR ATLANTIC RELEASING CORP. R RESTRICTED

VALLEY GIRL (1983)

DIRECTOR: MARTHA COOLIDGE

WRITERS: ANDREW LANE AND WAYNE CRAWFORD

STARS: NICOLAS CAGE, DEBORAH FOREMAN,
ELIZABETH DAILY, CAMERON DYE AND MICHELLE MEYRINK

Technically, Nicolas Cage's next movie after *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* was *Rumble Fish*, in an important supporting role.

However, given that he was only seventeen years old and the nobody nephew of the film's director, Francis Ford Coppola, other actors in the film felt that he was there only because of nepotism. To counter that, he chose to change his name from Nicolas Coppola to Nicolas Cage and that's the name in the credits, when it was released in October 1983.

I'm looking at *Valley Girl* next, though, as it was released in April 1983, half a year ahead of *Rumble Fish*, because it was shot in two weeks and was intended to be an exploitation flick, a feature meant to take advantage of a notable 1982 fad. Frank Zappa's only top 40 hit, *Valley Girl*, popularised the peculiar vocabulary used by the youth of the San Fernando Valley and it was ripe to be exploited. However, it came out in June 1982, so this was too late to capitalise on it properly, but it's all the better for not trying.

Well, it tries in the scenes that unfold in a valley mall behind the opening credits. Girls in pastel clothes and big hair go shopping and gossip in an echo of Moon in the song. Grody. Gnarly. I can't stand it. Awesome. So bitchin'. It gets old before the conversation is over and we dread having to sit through ninety more minutes of that. Like totally.

Fortunately, they tone it down when they talk to guys and the whole point of being a Val appears to be that you talk to guys and, later, talk about them. We shift from the mall to the beach, where Julie first catches sight of Randy, then to a bedroom and then to a party. It's the valley girl life.

Julie is the true lead, with Randy as her love interest rather than the other way around. It's only traditional Hollywood sexism that credits Nicolas Cage ahead of Deborah Foreman, even if he comes out of this potential disaster better than she does. Realistically, that he does so is probably why he's as famous as he is now and she's best known for horror movies like *April Fool's Day*, *Waxwork* and *Sundown: The Vampire in Retreat*.

Initially, we're probably all focused on the valley girls, even if the cutest one is Elizabeth Daily as Loryn, because we have a feeling that this is going to be another teen sex comedy, a feeling backed up by the fact that its female director, the debuting Martha Coolidge, found free reign only if she somehow included four pairs of naked breasts.

Daily's are the first, which may or may not have anything to do with why she would go on to marry Rick Salamon of *1 Night in Paris* fame. Certainly they're not why she's best known to

us today as a voice actor.

However, valley girls exist for guys and we know what they think of Randy the moment they first see him. It isn't Julie who spouts "My God, what a hunk!" as he runs goofily up from the ocean in a pair of shorts and a prominent V of chest hair, but she's paying attention and they lock eyes.

By comparison, his first lines are the far less memorable "What?", "I don't want to go to the valley", "I don't want to go to the valley" and "I'm not in the mood to go to the valley."

Of course, he immediately goes to the valley to the party his buddy Fred overheard details about, because, if he didn't, we wouldn't have a movie.

They're soon thrown out because they stick out like sore thumbs—we're supposed to think of them as punks—and because Tommy is very jealous of Randy's immediate connection with Julie. You see, Tommy didn't call Julie so Julie dumped Tommy and Tommy didn't care until he saw Julie with Randy and so Tommy throws Randy out of the party and the whole movie is as teenage soap opera as that suggests.

Also, everyone's looking for someone else and that includes the people who already have someone. "If I was twenty years younger," Julie's dad tells her. That probably didn't seem creepy in 1983, especially as Steve and Sarah are old hippies who run a health food store. However, Suzi Brent's stepmum Beth lusting after Skip, a random partygoer, probably did. She's blatant. He's a coward. I would not have run from Lee Purcell.

What surprised me was that, after this poor beginning, I started to really dig the movie. It isn't a great film and it wouldn't make the top hundred loose adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* —and, in case we didn't notice that, there's an overt nod to it in a montage scene. However, I stopped hating it and gradually acknowledged how much I was actually enjoying it.

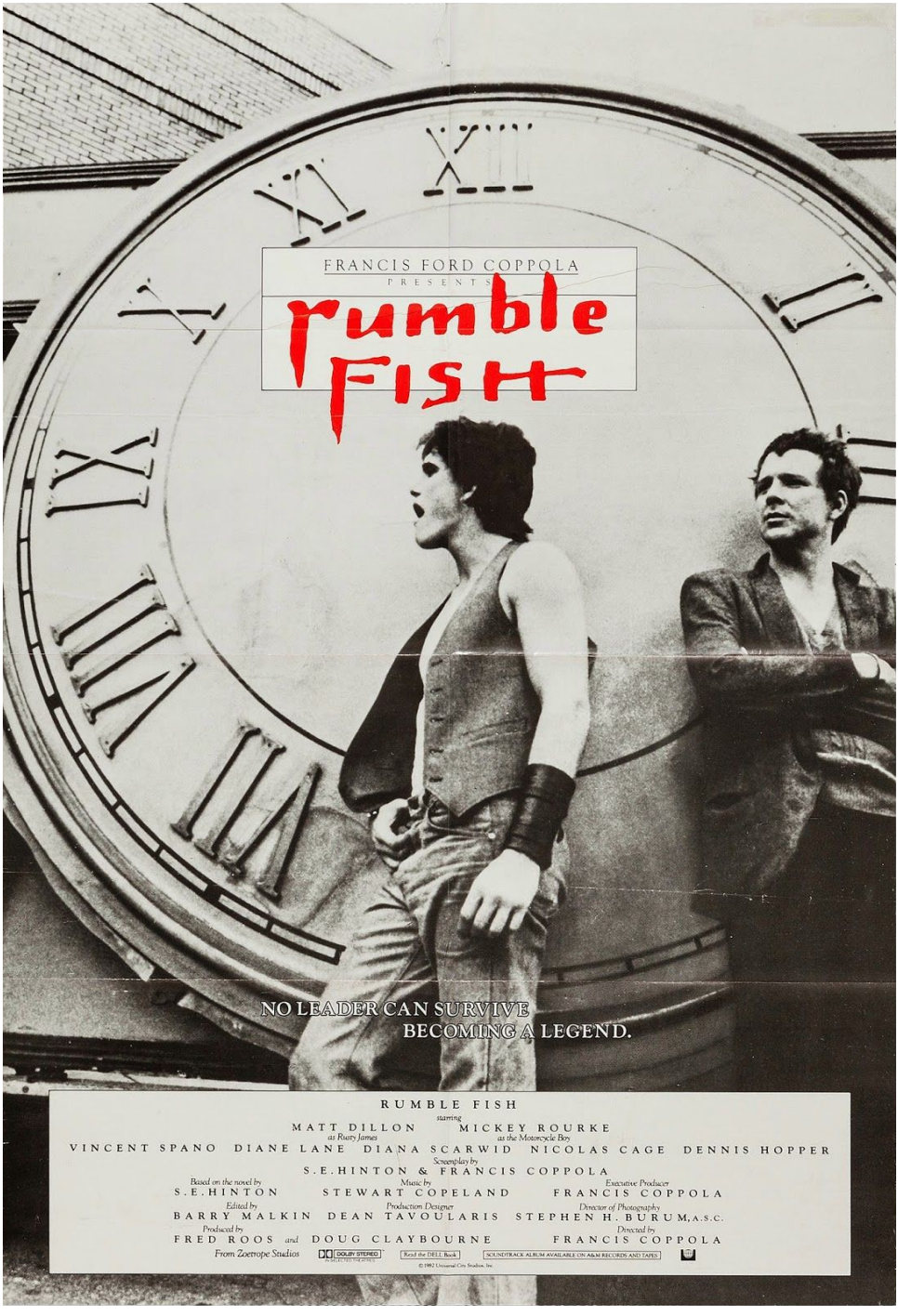
And Nicolas Cage is the majority of that. He starts out goofy and awkward, which initially makes him seem amateur and unworthy, and I didn't buy him as the hunk the girls lust after —though who I am to judge?—but he is clearly different and that's important here in a party of pastel clones, Stepford Wives in training.

And he grows as he deepens. His world is on Sunset Boulevard, where he knows everyone. A club there is his home away from home and the only downside is that it's the Plimsouls as their house band rather than an edgier group from the flyers in the bathroom, like the Circle Jerks. This is safe, the producers much happier with power pop as an edgy alternative to new wave than hardcore punk.

The rise/fall/rise of Julie and Randy isn't at all surprising but it's surprisingly endearing. I wonder how much of my connection to it was driven by how little I found any connection to anyone else. Julie always seems a little more mature than her friends and I was never going to be on Tommy's side, even though he's more of an asshole than an outright villain.

But I saw Randy as more than just a way out of the valley for Julie. He can be an asshole too but he cares. And maybe that's what this is to me: the two people in the entire picture who actually care about someone end up with that person, against the odds. And isn't that what a romcom is supposed to do?

I'd still pick Mrs. Brent though.


FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA
PRESENTS
RUMBLE FISH
NO LEADER CAN SURVIVE
BECOMING A LEGEND.
RUMBLE FISH
starring
MATT DILLON as Rusty James
MICKEY ROURKE as the Motorcycle Boy
VINCENT SPANO DIANE LANE DIANA SCARWID NICOLAS CAGE DENNIS HOPPER
Screenplay by
S.E.HINTON & FRANCIS COPPOLA
Based on the novel by
S.E.HINTON
Music by
STEWART COPELAND
Executive Producer
FRANCIS COPPOLA
Edited by
BARRY MALKIN
Production Designer
DEAN TAVOULARIS
Director of Photography
STEPHEN H. BURUM, A.S.C.
Produced by
FRED ROOS and DOUG CLAYBOURNE
Directed by
FRANCIS COPPOLA
From Zoetrope Studios
DOLBY STEREO
Read the DELL Book
SOUNDTRACK ALBUM AVAILABLE ON A&M RECORDS AND TAPES
© 1982 Universal City Studios, Inc.

RUMBLE FISH (1983)

DIRECTOR: FRANCIS COPPOLA

WRITERS: S. E. HINTON AND FRANCIS COPPOLA, FROM THE NOVEL BY S. E. HINTON

STARS: MATT DILLON, MICKEY ROURKE,
VINCENT SPANO, DIANE LANE, DIANA SCARWID, NICOLAS CAGE AND DENNIS HOPPER

Before *Valley Girl*, Nicolas Cage appeared in *Rumble Fish*, the first of three eighties films for him that were directed by his uncle, Francis Ford Coppola. He would later make *Deadfall* for his elder brother, Christopher Coppola; their father, August Coppola, is Francis's brother.

Francis Ford Coppola was a huge bankable name in 1983. He'd made some of the biggest and most important movies of the seventies, such as the first two *Godfather* films, *Apocalypse Now*—from which I got the name Apocalypse Later—and *The Conversation*. Arguably, that's the only reason he was able to get this movie made, because it's what he called "an art film for teenagers". And he wouldn't find it quite so easy to make something like it again.

It felt like a throwback to me, an homage to the rebel movies of the fifties but not to the rebels themselves. And that's jarring, because the visuals in this movie, which are stunning, hearken back to the coolness of Brando and Dean and even, a little later, McQueen, but its message is that rebellion for the sake of it has become almost conservative.

When Brando's character in *The Wild One* was asked what he was rebelling against, he famously answered, "Whaddya got?" If we ask Rusty James the same question here, he might say, "Because that's what we've always done." It's his brother who might have a good answer but he's keeping quiet. He's the Motorcycle Boy, cool but educated, knowing and possibly half a dozen eggs short of a basket.

He's also Mickey Rourke, in many ways the MacGuffin of the movie, because everyone is a fan of the Motorcycle Boy, the legend who got the gangs to observe a truce, but he doesn't want the job any more. He sees the life that he's lived as over and so he floats around in a vague attempt to persuade his idiot brother to wake up.

Rusty James is the lead character, which is enough to make Matt Dillon the star, but he's just a follower, not that he knows it. He thinks he's going to take over from the Motorcycle Boy as the badass in town and he knows it's a given because nobody—except his girlfriend's kid sister—calls him by one name. He's Rusty James with both names, and that makes him important in his own mind. Just nobody else's.

There are a few things you can't miss.

One is that the movie, made for teenagers in 1983, is in black and white. Well, except the Siamese fighting fish of the title, seen in vivid colour in the window of the local pet store, so highlighting how crucial they are to the movie as a metaphor for these disaffected youths.

That's because Motorcycle Boy, who's only twenty-one, is colourblind and partially deaf. He sees everything like on a black and white

TV with the sound down low. And so we do as well, underlining how there's meaning here if we care enough to dig for it.

Another thing we can't miss is the fact that everybody here is somebody we recognise. It's an insanely deep cast, one that just keeps on relentlessly giving. This is a deep cut for what seems like everyone.

For instance, the first major scene is when Midget arrives at Benny's Billiards to call out Rusty James on behalf of Biff Wilcox. Midget is Laurence Fishburne, so young at this point that he's still Larry Fishburne and I failed to recognise him. Rusty James's sidekick Smokey is a loose Nicolas Cage. His dorky friend Steve is Vincent Spano. Their chunkier buddy BJ is Chris Penn. Rusty James's girl is Diane Lane. That's Tom Waits behind the bar, in a role that he could do in his sleep but still makes special. That's a heck of a lot of future award winners in one scene.

And it doesn't stop there. Rourke shows up at the fight, his grand return to town. William Smith is the ominous beat cop they all have to pass to leave. Their father is Dennis Hopper in a dream of a supporting role. In a blink and you'll miss it part, there's even S. E. Hinton as a prostitute, the author of the source books for this and Coppola's previous film, *The Outsiders*.

Ironically, though, because every one of the actors mentioned does a great job here, I'd see the highest praise as being due to members of the crew: Coppola the director who held it all together; Stephen H. Burum as the director of photography who shot the film; and Stewart Copeland, the drummer with the Police, who composed the unusual score. All three shine in a succession of highlights.

The experimental scenes! The shadowplay! The crowd scenes! The perspective shots! The contrast! The use of extras! The rhythmic and bizarre score that makes everything urgent, as if it's built from ticking clocks and cicadas! Oh, and the ambitious long one shot take close to the end of the picture!

There's so much to praise here without ever talking about that insanely deep cast, because we can talk about German expressionism and the French new wave and... nah, I need to talk about Nicolas Cage because he's why I'm here.

As Smokey, he initially seems to be a minor character because, if Rusty James is the lead, then his sidekick is Steve, his oldest friend. It's only as we grasp the perspectives of the film that we realise that Smokey is the star of the other story in town, the one we're not seeing because we're watching Rusty James through Motorcycle Boy's disappointed eyes.

While Rusty James thinks of himself as the gang leader and blissfully trusts that everyone else will acknowledge that, his deputy Smokey is actually running the gang in his stead, what gang there is at this point in time. That means we don't see him much but, when we do see him, it's at a crucial moment, especially late in the film in Smokey's biggest scene.

He's with Patty now, because she's moved on from Rusty James. The guys go out front to talk and Smokey gives him a serious wake up call, not with fists but with purest honesty, as Rusty James hasn't noticed that the entire film is trying to hammer this point home to him. The gang era is gone. You aren't your brother. Nobody is ever going to follow you anywhere.

It's one of the most important scenes in the film and star Matt Dillon is on the receiving end. It falls to Nicolas Cage to dish it out and he's in fine form, enough to update that talent reel he started with *The Best of Times*.

It was 1943.
And young men were counting the days before they went off to war...
Racing with the Moon
PARAMOUNT PICTURES PRESENTS A JAFFE-LANSING PRODUCTION • A RICHARD BENJAMIN FILM
SEAN PENN • ELIZABETH McGOVERN • RACING WITH THE MOON • NICOLAS CAGE
MUSIC BY DAVE GRUSIN • WRITTEN BY STEVEN KLOVES • PRODUCED BY ALAIN BERNHEIM AND JOHN KOHN
PG PARENTAL GUIDANCE SUGGESTED SOME MATERIAL MAY NOT BE SUITABLE FOR CHILDREN
DIRECTED BY RICHARD BENJAMIN
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840021
RACING WITH THE MOON

RACING WITH THE MOON (1984)

DIRECTOR: RICHARD BENJAMIN

WRITER: STEVE KLOVES

STARS: SEAN PENN, ELIZABETH MCGOVERN AND NICOLAS CAGE

This one was completely new to me. I could be excused for not knowing about *The Best of Times*, as everyone involved probably tried to pretend it never happened. I'd seen *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* and *Rumble Fish* and I knew about *Valley Girl*, even if I hadn't seen it. This film, though, I had never even heard of.

It's another Sean Penn movie, though he's a clear lead this time out instead of just through growing consensus in hindsight. Co-starring is Elizabeth McGovern as his romantic lead. And that leaves Nicolas Cage as the also ran on the poster, easily in the third most prominent role but not a particularly sympathetic one.

Racing with the Moon is a comedy drama but there's a lot more drama here than comedy. It also counts as a period drama, but for a period that isn't that long ago, because it's Christmas 1942 when we start out and Hopper and Nicky are two young men in Point Muir, California waiting to be called up for war.

It's no spoiler to suggest that they don't get there in this picture, because it's all about the six weeks they have before they leave and, in large part, how they choose to spend it. And, yeah, that translates to who they choose to spend it with. In Nicky's case, he wants to land as much tail as he can before he puts on a uniform, but Hopper only has eyes for one girl, even if he's yet to talk to her when we start out. In fact, when the local hooker, in the delightful form of a young Carol Kane, offers him "a free ride on the old merry-go-round", he doesn't take it.

Early on, our sympathies are with Hopper instead of Nicky. Penn underplays his part just as much as Cage overplays his, but that's a fair approach for both of them, a mismatched pair of friends who work together at Al's Bowl, not just manually setting the pins after each frame but even watering down the gin.

While Hopper isn't afraid to punch out the entitled young bully played by Crispin Glover, he's endearingly shy but confident as he tries to woo Caddie Winger. He leaves her flowers at the movie theatre kiosk where she works. When she comes into the diner he's eating at, he leaps over the counter to give her a pie. He also jumps on the back of the bus she catches to see where she's going home.

Cage is in many of these scenes too and he does well—he's losing a little of the goofiness he had in his early films, growing into himself and acting pretty naturally too—but Penn is a clear lead and he gets all the opportunities.

It's Hopper who follows his dream girl into the library to get her name, knocking over the religion aisle in the process. It's Hopper who accepts a rollerskating date, even though she sets him up with her friend instead of herself and even though he can't skate. It's Hopper who takes her skinnydipping in a secluded lake he discovered during a treasure hunt.

However, Cage does get opportunities here

and there and they start to show up more and more as the film runs on, albeit not in positive ways for his character.

It's Nicky who wants to get an eagle tattoo on his chest before they leave, but he musters up his courage by getting drunk and they can't muster up enough cash anyway. It's Nicky who wants to race the train, in a tense scene given that they're still drunk. Most importantly, it's Nicky who gets Sally Kaiser pregnant and the consequences of that run deep.

Racing with the Moon was made in 1984 but it feels like a seventies movie, back when writers were trying to get their names onto the Great American Movie. It was the debut credit for a young writer, Steve Kloves, who went on to a number of much bigger gigs. His next job was to write and direct *The Fabulous Baker Boys* and he would go on to write all eight *Harry Potter* movies.

The director was Richard Benjamin, a more famous actor at this point than director, best known for *Westworld* and *The Sunshine Boys*, but he demonstrates a light touch as a director his second time out. He'd follow it up with a set of reliable films, from *City Heat* to *The Money Pit* to *Mermaids*.

As capable as Kloves and Benjamin are here, it's really Penn's show, with McGovern a firm support and Cage the wildcard who keeps the story from getting too understated. Whenever something serious happens, like Caddie taking Hopper to a hospital where she delivers books to wounded soldiers, prompting a deep scene with Michael Madsen as an amputee suffering from phantom limb syndrome, then a lighter hearted scene is sure to follow, usually led by Cage. In this instance, it's Nicky pretending to sing *Tangerine* into a mop he's supposed to be cleaning the lanes with.

As you might imagine, the six week wait for our boys to be drafted quickly shrinks and that prompts a shift in tone. Hopper and Caddie are good together, but understandable doubts do creep in. Nicky and Sally are a disaster, leading to more tense scenes—he gets a powerful but unsympathetic one while drink driving. It's all serious now and Nicky just isn't in the mood for livening things up any more, handing off to a sense of sentimentality.

It's hard not to like *Racing for the Moon*, but it's not the sort of movie I expect to remember for long. I'm expecting to look back after a few years and only have impressions.

Penn is excellent here in a role that's about as different as could be comfortably imagined from *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, and I expect that acknowledgement to be what stays in my head the longest. McGovern is a strong leading lady, but it's very clearly a supporting role.

And Cage is growing into himself. While he was the lead in *Valley Girl* and he was the best thing about that film, it wasn't a particularly challenging role for him. Arguably there was more depth to Smokey in *Rumble Fish*, but that was a small part in a film packed with talent.

He's not the lead here either, but he gets more to do than he'd got thus far and he lives up to the challenge. He's decent as the goofy young man who hasn't really grown up yet, so treats life as a party, but he's also decent as a more serious young man having to deal with the consequences of his mistakes, even if his character isn't.

Was he ready to take on a difficult lead role? Maybe not quite yet but he had surely got out from under his family's shadow and started a successful career on his own merits.

Where deals were made, lives were traded and the legends of jazz lit up the night.
The Cotton Club
ROBERT EVANS Presents
RICHARD GERE
Co-starring
GREGORY HINES · DIANE LANE · LONETTE McKEE · "THE COTTON CLUB" · BOB HOSKINS · JAMES REMAR
Music by
Director of Photography
Costumes Designed by
NICOLAS CAGE · ALLEN GARFIELD · FRED GWYNNE · JOHN BARRY · STEPHEN GOLDBLATT, B.S.C. · MILENA CANONERO
Production Designer
Supervising Editor
Producer Consultant
Co-Producers
Executive Producer
RICHARD SYLBERT · BARRY MALKIN · MILTON FORMAN · SYLVIO TABET and FRED ROOS · DYSON LOVELL
Line Producers
Story by
BARRIE M. OSBORNE & JOSEPH CUSUMANO · WILLIAM KENNEDY & FRANCIS COPPOLA and MARIO PUZO
Screenplay by
Produced by
Directed by
WILLIAM KENNEDY & FRANCIS COPPOLA · ROBERT EVANS · FRANCIS COPPOLA
DOLBY STEREO
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NSS 840130

THE COTTON CLUB (1984)

DIRECTOR: FRANCIS COPPOLA

WRITERS: WILLIAM KENNEDY & FRANCIS COPPOLA,
BASED ON A STORY BY WILLIAM KENNEDY & FRANCIS COPPOLA AND MARIO PUZO,
SUGGESTED BY JAMES HASKINS'S PICTORIAL HISTORY

STARS: RICHARD GERE, GREGORY HINES, DIANE LANE,
LONETTE MCKEE, BOB HOSKINS, JAMES REMAR, NICOLAS CAGE, ALLEN GARFIELD AND FRED GWYNNE

Hollywood hasn't traditionally done a good job looking at history, its biopics just about as accurate as reality television is real, but, when it does look at history, that history tends to be almost exclusively white.

The Cotton Club is an admirable attempt to highlight a whole era of history, by focusing in on a single location that was highly important to both blacks and whites. It was made with a biracial cast by white filmmakers but based on a picture book history by a black educator. It's predominantly set in a famous nightclub in a black area of New York that gave black singers and dancers well paid gigs but they performed for an almost exclusively white audience.

As a setting, it's glorious. We're in the 1930s so segregation is in firm effect. The races are not supposed to mix and Gregory Hines finds himself chastised for simply entering through the front door, even after he's been hired as an entertainer. Also in effect is prohibition, as it had been for a decade, but the Cotton Club maintained a full drinks list for its clientele, as it was run by New York gangsters with clout in the community.

While I knew all that, I was still surprised to discover, as we soon do, that *The Cotton Club* is a gangster flick. I knew about it, that it was a Francis Ford Coppola film, that it was critically acclaimed even though the box office wasn't great and that it was a film I should see, but I still somehow thought it was more about what happened on stage than off, that it was more about jazz music and dancers than gangsters and racial history.

Really, it's about all four of those things and the first scene is a very capable highlight to that. We're at a different venue, the Bamville Club, where lots of black guys are jamming on stage, along with a token white cornet player, who then takes a seat in the audience. In come a couple of cops who aren't cops at all, because they're in disguise to hurl dynamite under the table of gang leader Dutch Schultz. The cornet player knocks him out of harm's way and so the gangster promptly and firmly takes him under his wing, without any chance to say no.

As in *Rumble Fish*, Coppola brings in a deep cast list but it's a more surprising one. Maybe not the leads: that cornet player, Dixie Dwyer, is Richard Gere, who plays his own solos, and Schultz is James Remar snarling through his very best Edward G. Robinson impression. We shouldn't be surprised to discover that Dixie's younger and wilder brother Vincent is Nicolas Cage or that he wants to join Schultz's crew.

However, when we shift over to the Cotton Club, we find that Owney Madden, its owner, is played by Bob Hoskins, somehow reminding us simultaneously of the genial Eddie Valiant in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* and the ruthless Harold in *The Long Good Friday*. And his right hand man, Frenchy Demange, is, of all people, Fred Gwynne, at 6' 5" the tallest man in every scene. That's a brave casting choice, given that everyone and their dog still recognised him as Herman Munster, but the gamble pays off.

The central thrust of the story has Schultz task Dwyer with taking care of his mistress, a task he takes a little too literally, with exactly the sort of effect you're already expecting. She is Diane Lane who plays her as a quintessential flapper looking for her way up. She's only with Schultz to sleep her way into a nightclub of her very own.

A further story arc follows an accomplished tap dancer, Sandman Williams, both in work, as he gets hired by the Cotton Club with his brother and moves on up solo, and in love, as he woos an established performer, Lila Rose Oliver. He's Gregory Hines, one of the best in the business at this point, and she's Lonette McKee, the only name thus far I didn't know but clearly a very talented lady.

Further down the cast, there are names like Jennifer Grey, Tom Waits, Larry Fishburne and an excellent Julian Beck, who was so good two years later in *Poltergeist II: The Other Side*, but a cast this deep keeps on delivering, with many of the greatest performances being given right there on the stage at the Cotton Club by these dancers or those singers. Hines shines, as does his brother Maurice, but Larry Marshall has a blast as Cab Calloway. He's the best of a slew of characters we recognise, from Charlie Chaplin to Lucky Luciano via Jimmy Cagney and Gloria Swanson. After all, the Cotton Club did have Celebrity Nights.

Gere is good. Lane is good. Hoskins is good. Everybody's good. Hines is excellent. Beck is a revelation. And hey, Nicolas Cage is good too, in a solid supporting slot with a story arc all of his own. It's not a particular deep one, being another dumbass kid using the leverage of his brother's good favour with Dutch Schultz to land himself a job as a low level gangster, then building himself up through loyalty and deceit to being something of a force himself.

I won't spoil how that turns out but it's fair to assume that, given that he's a minor player in this sprawling story, it's not much to write home to mama about. He does get himself on a few newspaper headlines and death is on his heels throughout, whether he's dishing it out or taking it, so it's a decent role.

However, it's another one that doesn't have a lot of challenge in it. There are some hints here of the future Nicolas Cage, the one who took every role he could to pay off a spiralling tax debt and overplayed a whole slew of them, but I've seen a lot more outrageous gangsters in my time. It's fair to say that James Remar is one of those in this very film, being possessed of a short fuse and a vicious streak, which is a dangerous combination.

So Cage is still paying his dues at this point six films into his career, but he'd had one lead already and he wasn't far away from more. It was going well and, unlike Vincent Dwyer, he didn't have to shoot up a single nightclub to make his name.

BIRDY
TRI-STAR PICTURES PRESENTS AN ALAN PARKER FILM "BIRDY"
AN A&M FILMS PRODUCTION
MATTHEW MODINE NICOLAS CAGE MUSIC BY PETER GABRIEL
PRODUCTION DESIGNER GEOFFREY KIRKLAND DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY MICHAEL SERESIN
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER DAVID MANSON BASED UPON THE NOVEL "BIRDY" BY WILLIAM WHARTON
SCREENPLAY BY SANDY KROOPF & JACK BEHR PRODUCED BY ALAN MARSHALL
DIRECTED BY ALAN PARKER
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840144
"BIRDY"

BIRDY (1984)

DIRECTOR: ALAN PARKER

WRITERS: SANDY KROOPF AND JACK BEHR, BASED ON THE NOVEL BY WILLIAM WHARTON

STARS: MATTHEW MODINE AND NICOLAS CAGE,
JOHN HARKINS, SANDY BARON, KAREN YOUNG AND BRUNO KIRBY

Like *Racing with the Moon*, Nicolas Cage finds himself in a substantial supporting role, where he's playing second fiddle to the lead who has more opportunities to shine. Like *Racing with the Moon*, he's the dynamic half of the pair, as Matthew Modine is calmer and quieter, even before everything goes horribly wrong at war, after which point Modine doesn't even speak.

Where they differ is that *Birdy* begins with these characters getting back from war rather than ending with them leaving for one. It's not the same war, because Hopper and Nicky were leaving for World War II but Birdy and Al get back from Vietnam.

They don't come back entirely intact either. Sgt. Al Columbato, Cage's character, has a steel jaw wrapped up in bandages that cover half his face, just like he's the Invisible Man. Birdy only has minor injuries but there's something wrong with his brain. He hasn't said a word in a month at the military hospital, he won't feed himself and he spends his time contorted into strange positions looking at the light shining into his window. It's pretty clear from the title that he thinks he's a bird.

We learn why in the flashbacks that take up much of the film. Birdy's a pigeon fancier and, when he and Al first meet as youths in Philly, they spend a lot of their time catching birds and training them to be carrier pigeons. They even wear feathered suits so that the birds will think that they're like them, so they can catch them more effectively. After that phase ends, because these flashbacks are episodic and so there's always another one to move onto, he continues to be involved with birds, obsessed with the idea of flight. He dreams about flying and he even learns to do it himself, for a little distance, using an ornithopter, after launching himself off the handlebars of Al's bike.

And so, given that he's had such an abiding affinity with birds as a youth, is it surprising that whatever traumatic situation he ends up in over there in Nam prompts him into a major reversion into thinking he's a bird?

Birdy was critically acclaimed, as indeed was the novel on which it was based, but it didn't do well at the box office, grossing only $1.4m against a $12m budget. I wonder if anyone was confused like me as to how old these kids are supposed to be.

Everything hints at them being teenagers in these flashbacks, even before we see them in high school, but Modine was twenty-five when he made this and he looks it. Cage looks older, even though he was only twenty at the time. They both seem to be about the right age to be returning broken from Vietnam and I have to underline that those scenes are the best in the film, but I couldn't buy either of them in the

flashback scenes, as engaging as the story got.

I'm aware that Birdy has been different, in ways that we ought to see as neurodivergent in 2022 but, had I watched this back in 1984, I would have wondered initially why the young adults were acting like kids, and, when I had to acknowledge that they really were kids, why these older actors were cast in those roles.

I had another, more serious problem too, in the fact that the flashback scenes take up the vast majority of the movie but gradually seem to be important only in how they flavour the modern day scenes, which dominate.

For instance, the first flashback scene with a serious kick to it is immediately overshadowed by the present day scenes that follow it. After Birdy's parents destroy their pigeon loft, they buy a car from a junk yard to restore. Because they're both underage, Al's dad registers it in his own name and then sells it to a friend. The scene with kick has the shy Birdy standing up to Mr. Columbato and it's an excellent scene in which Modine shines.

The only thing that spoils it is the next one, because Al succumbs to claustrophobia there in Birdy's cell, presumably as a PTSD episode, and screams at the door to be let out, all while Birdy, on the floor in the foreground, visibly cringes at the raised volume. It's brutal and it speaks very deeply to what war does to young minds. Suddenly, Birdy talking back to Al's dad seems like nothing.

These hospital scenes are magnetic, Modine and Cage fantastic in all of them, even though it was hard work for both.

Modine had actually auditioned for Al, but director Alan Parker caught an "introverted honest quality" in him, so cast him as Birdy, which prompted the actor to go through "an extraordinary transformation" in his mind to make it work.

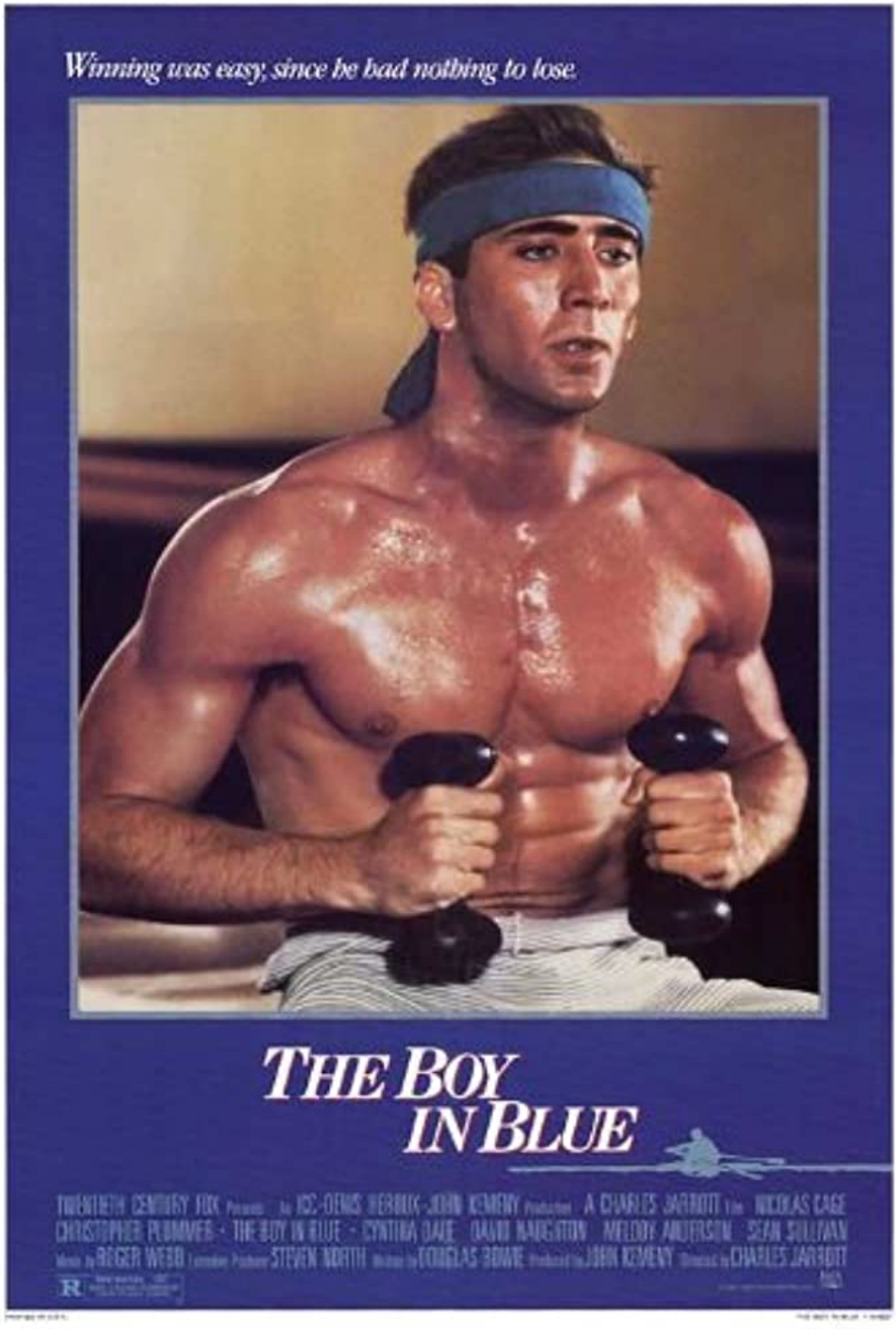
Cage was "terrified of the role of Al because it was like nothing I'd ever done before, and I didn't know how to get to the places the role was asking me to go emotionally." While Cage isn't top of anyone's list of method actors, he had two of his front teeth pulled out to make it feel like he had lost something, he slept in his bandages for five weeks and he lost fifteen pounds because he felt that, with his face that damaged, Al would have trouble eating.

Whatever they went through, they're both excellent and, in the context of this zine, Cage is far better here than in anything he'd done before. While he didn't embarrass himself in earlier parts, even *The Best of Times*, this is his first great role and his first great performance.

In fact, while Modine does more with less, I began to see this as Al's story, not Birdy's, and that flavoured how I started to see it progress.

If we read this straight, then Birdy is lost in his mind, even though he's safe in a military hospital, and Al is brought in by his doctor to try to reach him. However, I started to read it differently, assuming that Birdy had died as a teenager, so obsessed with the idea of flight that he tried it by jumping out of his window and died in the attempt. Maybe Al is the one who's being treated here and Birdy is his safe place. The moment he acknowledges that his friend is dead will be the moment his healing will truly begin.

Frustratingly, the film refuses to give us an answer there, leaving it entirely up to us. My reaction to the ending was strong enough that I realised how invested I had become in the picture. However, it seems that I'd read more into it than was actually there.


Winning was easy, since he had nothing to lose.
THE BOY IN BLUE
TWENTIETH CENTURY FOX
A CHARLES JARROTT film
NICOLAS CAGE
CHRISTOPHER PLUMMER
THE BOY IN BLUE
CYNTHIA DALE
DAVID HARGUTTON
MELODY ANDERSON
SEAN SULLIVAN
ROGER WEBB
STEVEN NORTH
DOUGLAS BRAVE
JOHN KEMENY
CHARLES JARROTT
R

THE BOY IN BLUE (1986)

DIRECTOR: CHARLES JARROTT

WRITERS: DOUGLAS BOWIE

STARS: NICOLAS CAGE, CHRISTOPHER PLUMMER,
CYNTHIA DALE, DAVID NAUGHTON, SEAN SULLIVAN AND MELODY ANDERSON

There have been a few surprises during my Nicolas Cage runthrough. *The Best of Times* was one for sure. That I've rather enjoyed much of what's followed was another. And that it took him this long to make a theatrically exhibited dud is a third, but that's exactly what it is.

Let's start with a question. Cast your eyes at the poster on the left and hazard a guess as to when *The Boy in Blue* is set. That's right! 1976.

Oh, sorry, you're a century off. It's 1876 and this is a biopic of a Canadian sculler called Ned Hanlan, who wore a moustache and not a Jane Fonda workout headband. Amazingly enough, he also sounded Canadian, given that he was, well, Canadian.

The problem isn't just that Cage doesn't try to approximate authenticity here, unlike the period pieces he had made immediately before it, it's also that every other sculler in the film, and there are a bunch, look far more like Ned Hanlan than Cage does. He does a good job as a Californian surfer dude, which means that he kind of showed up for the wrong movie.

The good here is mostly around Ned Hanlan being a fantastic subject for a biopic, even if a sport like sculling is hardly sports movie gold. His story was a fascinating one from his early days, rowing to school and a local fish market, delivering the catch quicker than other local fishermen. That's drama.

He won his first amateur championship at eighteen, then turned professional, won a big race at Philadephia's Centennial International Exposition, became champion of Canada, then the United States, then the world. He was the first Canadian to hold the world championship in any individual sport and he held his status as world sculling champion for five years.

If that wasn't enough, his dominance was in part due to a different technique. Sliding seats were a new innovation in his era and he used the slide simultaneously with the swing. Yeah, maybe that's not particularly cinematic, but if that's what Cage is doing, then it may well be the most cinematic aspect to the film. For all his many faults here, it looks like he's rowing for real and we can buy into him doing it well.

The bad here is mostly around most of that not actually being included in the script. I'm used to Hollywood biopics making shit up left and right, but this was a Canadian film and I'd have expected more accuracy.

This film would have us believe that Hanlan was a rumrunner who didn't turn professional and only went to Philly because a conman set the police onto him. They arrive while Melody Anderson is bouncing around on top of him, so our conman appears with a convenient escape plan to save him and we're off and running.

There's a lot of talent here, but it's not well used. Cage isn't miscast; he just isn't doing the job he should be doing. Anderson has fun with

her role but overplays it so much that we start to see *Flash Gordon* as the height of realism. Oh, and she's quickly relegated to a support role, because the leading lady is Cynthia Dale, who hasn't shown up yet.

David Naughton brings relish to Bill McCoy, that conman, who also has the most depth of any character here. The villain is Christopher Plummer who could do this sort of thing in his sleep and may well have done as Colonel Knox, the face of a corrupt sport of gentlemen.

And yes, everything's done with the utmost decorum, but Knox hires thugs to drug racers and break their bones and sabotage their boats so his bets pay off. It's a bloody business, this sport of sculling, don't you know.

What counters that is the romance, because of course this had to be a romance. Knox has a niece, Margaret Sutherland, and Hanlan can't resist her from moment one, even when she's an entitled waste of space. At least she's given good lines, but the scenes surrounding them aren't remotely up to the same quality.

Arguably the best line comes when Hanlan is at a party of the beautiful people. Margaret is elegant and socially astute. Ned is rough and ready and utterly out of his depth, so pitches a hissy fit to her. "You wouldn't recognise wit and sophistication if it hit you in the face," she tells him. He kisses her anyway, she slaps him and it's acutely embarrassing for them and us.

What's most upsetting is that this romance is the only true part of all of this, because Ned Hanlan actually married Margaret Sutherland, though she probably wasn't at all like this one.

That Cynthia Dale is excellent as Margaret is a small mercy, given what their romance leads to. Hanlan gives up during his next race with a broken heart, which is problematic given that the rower who would beat him has bet on him and so gives up himself and suddenly nobody wants to row. What a farce.

Here's where I ought to state that you can't write the rest of the script, because you know less about Ned Hanlan than I do, given that I'm looking at his Wikipedia page right now. What I'll actually state is that you can absolutely do that, because this is as historically accurate as *Braveheart*, which is to say almost not at all.

For instance, do you think there's a training montage scene? Is Hanlan going to be banned from an entire country for doing something a little ungentlemanly? Is that new sliding seat innovation going to play an important part?

Just in case you're not willing to commit to answers quite yet, let me add that the sliding seat was invented by George Warin, who I'm sure you won't be too surprised to discover happens to be Hanlan's coach. Does that make a difference?

It really shouldn't, because this gets notably predictable, as if it was written by AIs who had been fed the scripts of the last thousand made up sport biopics and then churned out their own version.

And that's how they cast Nicolas Cage as an eighties surfer dude version of a 19th century Canadian sculler.

I'm open to better interpretations but that's the best one I can come up with.

Knowing what you know now,
what would you do differently?
Peggy Sue is going back with the chance
to change her destiny.
PEGGY SUE
Got Married
...or will she?
TRI-STAR PICTURES AND RASTAR PRESENT A PAUL R. GURIAN/ZOETROPE STUDIOS PRODUCTION
KATHLEEN TURNER
"PEGGY SUE GOT MARRIED" NICOLAS CAGE
BARRY MILLER as Richard CATHERINE HICKS Music Composed and Conducted by JOHN BARRY Edited by BARRY MALKIN Production Designer DEAN TAVOULARIS
Director of Photography JORDAN CRONENWETH, A.S.C. Executive Producer BARRIE M. OSBORNE Written by JERRY LEICHTLING & ARLENE SARNER Produced by PAUL R. GURIAN
PG-13 PARENTS STRONGLY CAUTIONED
Some Material May Be Inappropriate for Children Under 13
DELPHI
Directed by FRANCIS COPPOLA
FROM RASTAR
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TRI STAR PICTURES
PRINTED IN U.S.A.
NSS-660104 PEGGY SUE GOT MARRIED 1 SHEET

PEGGY SUE GOT MARRIED (1986)

DIRECTOR: FRANCIS COPPOLA

WRITERS: JERRY LEICHTLING AND ARLENE SARNER

STARS: KATHLEEN TURNER,
NICOLAS CAGE, BARRY MILLER, CATHERINE HICKS, DON MURRAY, BARBARA HARRIS,
JIM CARREY, WIL SHRINER, JOAN ALLEN AND KEVIN J. O'CONNOR

Here's a film that both my better half and I thought we'd seen before, albeit a long time ago, but discovered that it was new to us. Why I have no idea, because it seems like the sort of film we'd both have watched, even if it would have been for different reasons.

At the time, it was a Kathleen Turner movie, at a point when she was a huge star and so was able to pick her roles, but before she got truly interesting in films like *Serial Mom*. Nowadays, I'm watching for Nicolas Cage, who is, as far as I could tell, the worst thing about the film. If I had been watching in 1986, though, and you'd asked me who would become a big star, I may well have told you Jim Carrey, even though I have never been a particular fan of his.

And, of course, it's a Francis Coppola movie, sans his Ford middle name again. And yes, that does mean that Sofia Coppola shows up again as a younger sister. Cage has said that he had no intention of doing the movie, but his uncle asked so many times that he agreed, but only if he could be over the top. Which he is. He's Crazy Charlie the Appliance King, the star of a set of over the top commercials for his family appliance company as an old man and also the owner of an awkwardly high voice as a young one, a voice that makes him sound like he's on a dose of helium. He has said that he based it on *Pokey* in *The Gumby Show*. It was a Bad Idea and Kathleen Turner knew it.

He gets to play Crazy Charlie as both young and old because this is a fantasy movie, a kind of cross between *Back to the Future* and *Big*, and he's what I guess we could call a love interest for the leading lady, who starts out dedicated to divorcing him, not only because he's been playing around with a younger model by the name of Janet.

That leading lady is the titular Peggy Sue, who's ditched the Bodell she's gone by for the past quarter of a century for her maiden name of Kelcher right before attending her 25 year high school reunion with her adult daughter, played by a young Helen Hunt. It goes about as well as it could, with everyone and their dog asking her about Crazy Charlie. Her soon to be ex-husband isn't expected to show up but he does, right before the MC announces the King and Queen of this reunion.

That means that he can look uncomfortable because Richard Norvik has taken his crown, given that he's become a tech billionaire since high school. Of course, Peggy Sue is the Queen, which means she has to get up on stage, even though so she's wracked with nerves that she faints right then and there.

And she wakes up in 1960, after donating to

the blood drive. She remembers everything in between her old then of 1985 and the new now of 1960, but nobody else does. At the reunion, she issued a telling line: "If I knew then what I knew now, I'd do a lot of things differently." It seems clear that we're soon going to find out if she would.

From the very start, this is Turner's movie. She's excellent as Peggy Sue in both eras, even though the former has more fun as a notable anachronism than the latter. Almost about to graduate high school is supposedly the Best of Times, but Turner ably demonstrates that the confidence that comes with twenty-five more years of life is an absolute godsend, especially when you're thrown right into an algebra test you hadn't prepared for.

It's this confidence that enables her to ditch Charlie quickly. He has a three year plan that they can see other people so they can, get this, "comparison shop", and then settle down and get married because he's devoted to her. "Why wait?" she tells him. "Why not break up now?"

And off she goes to run all the reality of her situation past Richard the science nerd and go into the night on the back of Michael's bike. At the reunion she mentions that he was the one boy she wished she'd slept with before Charlie but he's the one the committee couldn't reach with an invite.

Some of this is played for laughs and I don't just mean Cage's helium voice. Peggy Sue tells her sister not to eat the red M&Ms, she throws down a couple of glasses of liquor, gets much drunker than she expects and grounded too, a side effect of being young she didn't expect.

Much of the humour comes from a variety of supporting characters, though, Charlie for one but Walter Getz too. And "What Walter wants, Walter Getz" is applied to Jim Carrey's character three years before *Lethal Weapon 2* and Joe Pesci. I guess Leo Getz was referencing this film all along and I never knew.

Charlie is just wild and crazy like teenagers can be, especially ones with cars and budding singing careers. Walter is stylishly wacky but not so far as live action cartoon, which is what turned me off Carrey's more famous roles.

The film is at its best when Turner is trying to figure out how she wants her new future to unfold, and much of that takes place opposite Mr. Helium Voice. Cage is good at being whiny but that just prompts us to root for Richard or Michael more. Sometimes it entertains, like in a hilarious scene in Charlie's car when Peggy Sue comes on to him in double entendres and all his bombastic confidence shrivels up like a slug doused with salt. Mostly it doesn't.

He does find some charm at points, with his best scene surely the performance at Maddy's party of his barbershop quartet. He's the lead and Carrey is one of the others and they all do well, enough so that the girls collapsing in joy watching them is believable. Mostly, though, this is a decent film despite him rather than at least in part because of him.

I enjoyed Turner and Carrey more. I also got a lot of mileage out of Barry Miller as Richard and Kevin J. O'Connor as Michael in what was an "introducing" credit for him. Both of them would go on to strong character acting careers that I should check out. And I had a blast with the dialogue of husband and wife scriptwriters Jerry Leichtling and Arlene Sarner. The middle one below is delivered by Cage:

"You know what a penis is. Stay away from it."

"Elvis is dead. This is Ajax."

"I may be crazy but I'm not crazy enough to marry you twice."

Their lawless years are behind them.
Their child-rearing years lay ahead...

RAISING ARIZONA

A comedy beyond belief.

CIRCLE FILMS PRESENTS A TED AND JIM PEDAS/BEN BARENHOLTZ PRODUCTION · NICOLAS CAGE
HOLLY HUNTER · RAISING ARIZONA · DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY BARRY SONNENFELD · PRODUCTION DESIGNER JANE MUSKY
MUSIC BY CARTER BURWELL · ASSOCIATE PRODUCER DEBORAH REINISCH · EXECUTIVE PRODUCER JAMES JACKS
CO-PRODUCED BY MARK SILVERMAN · WRITTEN BY ETHAN COEN AND JOEL COEN · PRODUCED BY ETHAN COEN · DIRECTED BY JOEL COEN

PG-13 PARENTS STRONGLY CAUTIONED Some Material May Be Inappropriate for Children Under 13

DOLBY STEREO In Selected Theatres

PRINTS BY DELUXE

RAISING ARIZONA (1987)

DIRECTOR: JOEL COEN

WRITERS: ETHAN COEN AND JOEL COEN

STARS: NICOLAS CAGE, HOLLY HUNTER,
TREY WILSON, JOHN GOODMAN, WILLIAM FORSYTHE, SAM MCMURRAY,
FRANCES MCDORMAND AND RANDALL 'TEX' COBB

Nicolas Cage was generally panned for his creative decisions in *The Boy in Blue* and I was far from enthused by them in *Peggy Sue Got Married*, though some critics admired his balls in playing Ronny in a way nobody else would. Here is where his creative decisionmaking hit the jackpot for me, because he's simply perfect as H. I. "Hi" McDunnough.

I've seen *Raising Arizona* before and loved it. It doesn't stand up quite as well to a fresh 2022 viewing, but it's still a peach of a comedy from two favourite filmmakers, Joel and Ethan, the Coen Brothers. It's surreal, which works well for a Nicolas Cage lead role, and it's cartoonish in similar ways to *Crimewave*, a film they wrote but Sam Raimi directed. I adore *Crimewave* but acknowledge that it's a highly flawed picture. This is better, not least because it's focused.

Hi is a small time crook who's inept enough to keep getting sent to prison for convenience store robberies, each time being routed to Ed to take a mugshot. The first time she's military strict. The second time she's in tears after her fiancé had left her. The third time Hi proposes.

She's played in gloriously crisp fashion by Holly Hunter and she's a great contrast to Hi. He's tall, she's short. He's a crook, she's a cop. He's easygoing, she's dedicated. It underpins the entire movie.

Of course, the two marry and settle down to a quiet and theoretically honest life in a trailer in the desert outside Tempe, Arizona. The only catch is that Ed wants kids but it turns out that she's infertile. And so, in an act of poorly justified desperation, they see that furniture magnate Nathan Arizona's wife just gave birth to quintuplets and figure that they won't miss one of them.

Hunter is excellent here, but Cage is better still, in a role that he was born to play. Hi is a sympathetic fool, a man with little brain but much heart, a devoted husband who would do anything to make his wife happy. He also has a lot of depth, not least because this new crime births a dark side to his character that's given form by a memorable Randall 'Tex' Cobb. The quirks of Hi's personality were mostly scripted by the Coen Brothers, who were not open to a surrealist like Cage moving the goalposts, but he nails every aspect of the character.

Of course, it's not just about Hi and Ed and little Nathan Jr. A slew of characters figure out that the baby was stolen and so decide to take him for themselves, for a variety of reasons.

Glen, Hi's foreman at work, wants the baby because his wife Dot wants to raise it. They're swingers and Glen has no tact, in addition to being a racist heathen with kids who are the

epitome of poorly behaved. When Hi punches Glen out, we practically cheer.

Gale and Evelle, a couple of crooks Hi knew inside who have escaped and turned up at his trailer out of the blue, want the baby too, to be able to claim the reward money.

And there's Leonard Smalls, "warthog from Hell" in Ed's memorable phrasing, who wants the baby because he's a tracker who pressures Nathan Arizona into upping that reward.

Cue what the Coen Brothers do best, which is to arrange reality through cartoon logic into something that works as action, comedy and a whole bunch of other genres at the same time. There are great scenes early and late, but the best are in the middle when everyone places their cards on the table and the snatch and countersnatch business proceeds. Every time Nathan Jr. changes hands, the new hands pick up mama's increasingly beaten up copy of Dr. Spock's book on child rearing, just to be safe.

My favourite scene, or rather succession of scenes, comes after Hi punches Glen. Realising that he's going to be fired, he decides to rob a convenience store again, primarily for a pack of Huggies. He does so as ineptly as ever and, when Ed outside realises what he's doing, she drives away. Off he runs before the police get there with a stocking over his head, Huggies in hand and the world behind him.

He's chased by an overzealous clerk with a gun, trigger-happy cops, a growing profusion of dogs, the works, in a chase that takes him down roads, over fences, through yards, into someone's truck and even through someone's house. It's slapstick gold as only the Coens can deliver it and Cage is more than up to leading the scene.

It does help that the rest of the cast are an array of great character actors. John Goodman is suitably confident as Gale but his brother is even better, the always under-rated William Forsyth playing Evelle as even more of an idiot than Hi but without his reedeming qualities. Frances McDormand is an excellent Dot, even though she doesn't get a lot of screen time in this one. Cobb steals almost every scene he's in, only bested in his showdown with Cage.

However, all these actors benefit from the pristine script and sharp direction by the Coen Brothers and strong editing from Michael R. Miller. The cinematography is excellent too, courtesy of Barry Sonnenfeld, only known at this point for his work for the Coens, but soon to become a major director in his own right, a solid debut in *The Addams Family* leading to the even better sequel, *Get Shorty* and *Men in Black*.

By all reports, Cage didn't enjoy the shoot that much because of how tight a rein he was kept on, as indeed was everyone else. He'd had quite a lot of freedom over his past few films and he missed that, but the part was so suited to him that it didn't really matter too much. I have to admit that I was shocked when I read that the Coens were far from convinced by his auditions. I hope they can look back now and see how right they were to hire him.

Cage had made good films before, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* and *The Cotton Club* both top notch pictures, but neither were good because of him. He wasn't close to the top of the cast in either of them and his impact on their success was negligible. Here, he's the lead and he lives up to that billing. It might have been excellent without him, given the other talent involved, but it's hard to imagine someone else playing the part of Hi with as much wackiness and as much depth as Cage brings to the part.

This was his best and best fulfilled role thus far, arriving at a crucial point in his career.

6
5

MOONSTRUCK
CHER • NICOLAS CAGE
METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER PRESENTS A PATRICK PALMER-NORMAN JEWISON PRODUCTION
A NORMAN JEWISON FILM
"MOONSTRUCK" STARRING VINCENT GARDENIA OLYMPIA DUKAKIS AND DANNY AIELLO MUSIC COMPOSED AND ADAPTED BY DICK HYMAN
PRODUCTION DESIGNER PHILIP ROSENBERG COSTUME DESIGNER THEONI V. ALDREDGE DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY DAVID WATKIN FILM EDITOR LOU LOMBARDO
ASSOCIATE PRODUCER BONNIE PALEF WRITTEN BY JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY PRODUCED BY PATRICK PALMER & NORMAN JEWISON
DIRECTED BY NORMAN JEWISON
PG PARENTAL GUIDANCE SUGGESTED
SOME MATERIAL MAY NOT BE SUITABLE FOR CHILDREN
DOLBY STEREO
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MOONSTRUCK (1987)

DIRECTOR: NORMAN NEWISON

WRITER: JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY

STARS: CHER, NICOLAS CAGE,
VINCENT GARDENIA, OLYMPIA DUKAKIS AND DANNY AIELLO

I've not only seen *Moonstruck*, I've reviewed it at Apocalypse Later, albeit a long time ago in 2007, but I found that my reaction to it in 2022 was very similar.

The older I get, the less tolerance I find that I have for characters who bicker at each other for no reason but to bicker, that comfortable space where they can unload the frustrations of their lives onto loved ones who aren't going to punch them back. And, given that this film is about Italian Americans in New York, that's all it is for a while and it annoyed the crap out of me. That the actors tasked with doing this are very good at it is beside the point.

Our focus is on Loretta Castorini, a frumpy bookkeeper played by Cher, who won an Oscar for her work, and she starts out the picture by accepting a proposal of marriage from Johnny Cammareri, played by reliable Danny Aiello. She doesn't love him but she's ready to train him, so much so that she politely talks him all the way through the proposal, needed at every step. When he gets it right, everyone in the restaurant cheers and they're all set.

Well, Mr. Johnny—everyone calls him that, including Loretta—has one thing to do before the wedding: visit his dying mother in Sicily. At the airport, he gives her a card and asks her to call the number on it. Ask for Ronny. Invite him to the wedding. It's his younger brother, they haven't spoken for five years and it's too long for bad blood.

Because she's utterly reliable, Loretta takes care of that awkward task and we're really off and running because, even though the script muses on love through a slew of characters in an ensemble fashion, the central strand is all about Loretta and Ronny. And, as unlikely as it might seem, Cher's love interest is played by Nicolas Cage. It's a big leap from *Valley Girl*.

Back in 2007, I wasn't sold at all on Cage's performance here. What's hilarious is that he's actually of New York Italian stock, but it feels like he's playing a role, whereas Cher has what feels like every other ancestry in the book but feels natural here. He was experienced at this point and he'd done good work, most overtly in his previous picture, *Raising Arizona*, but he overplays this part massively and that makes him stand out in ways I didn't appreciate.

What I'm starting to realise is that this was very deliberate indeed. He's supposed to stand out and for a very good reason.

Everyone in this film has a similar mindset. They're all playing a time-honoured role that's decreed by heritage and they're completely consistent. Ronny is apart from all of that, not because of the rift with his brother or because it explains his artificial hand, but because he's an opera buff and opera is all about overblown passion. The rest of the cast are characters in a romantic drama. Cage plays Ronny like he has

no right to be in a romantic drama because he should be in an opera. And, once I got there, it all felt very different.

His initial scene is awful if we compare what he does to everyone else around him. He's at his bakery and everyone there is grounded in our reality. He rages, threatens to kill himself in front of everyone, waves his wooden hand around. Everything is a grand gesture. Loretta quietly puts up with him.

Then she cooks him a steak in his apartment and tells him that he's going to eat it and she explains her theory about him, that he's a wolf who cut off his own hand in order to get out of a relationship. Of course, it soon becomes an argument and he kisses her and she kisses him and suddenly they're in bed together.

Cher and Cage are one relationship here and they're a fascinating one, once I realised what Cage was doing. She transforms, initially for a date with him at the Metropolitan Opera and then again there, during a performance of *La bohème* when her emotions flood out over her face. He turns quiet and watches her, because he's the real Ronny at that point and not the character he plays in life.

The reason that the screenplay also won an Oscar is because John Patrick Shanley wove a whole slew of relationships into this story and they all reach a crucial point in a memorable final scene.

The third Oscar went to Olympia Dukakis as Loretta's mother, Rose. She's quieter than any of the other New York Italians here but she's just as acerbic. She has some great scenes with her husband Cosmo—Vincent Gardenia lost to Sean Connery for *The Untouchables*—but even better ones with an aging professor played by John Mahoney of *Frasier* fame who has a string of bad luck dating his young students.

Gardenia has great scenes with a girlfriend that he doesn't think his wife knows about. It comes out eventually, of course, after Loretta bumps into them together at the opera.

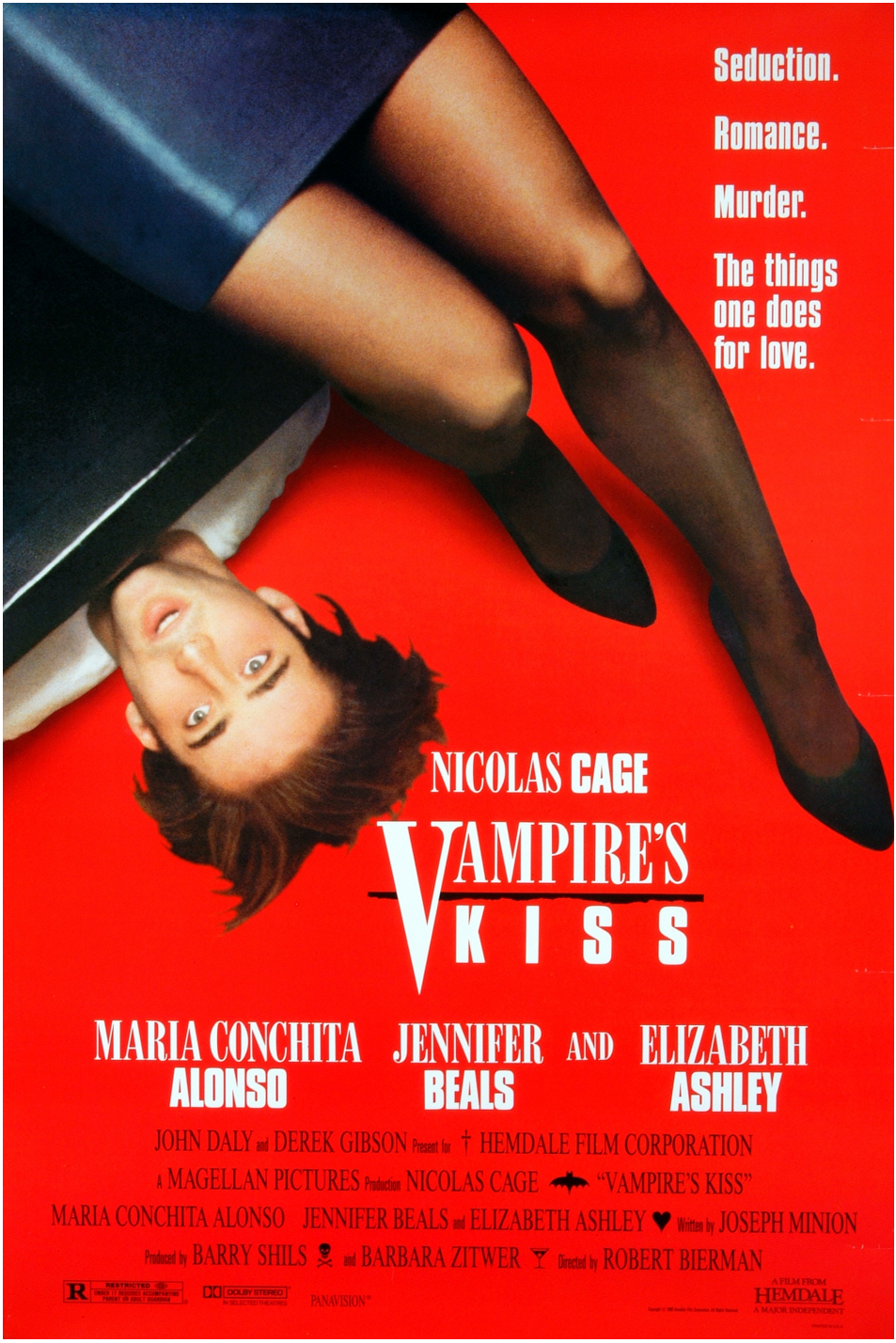
Julie Bovasso and Louis Guss also have great scenes together as the Cappomagis, Rita and Raymond, who is Rose's brother. That leaves Grandpa Castorini, who doesn't have anyone to have great scenes with, so steals quite a few anyway with his army of dogs.

I can't say that I connected to any of these characters, but I believed in them and, initial frustrations at the constant bickering aside, I connected to their connections in general. It's fair to say that love is the leading character in all the many aspects the script explores, and I connected to that too.

And that's why this is a brilliant film. It isn't my sort of film for quite a few reasons, and the way it starts out means that it has even more hurdles to overcome to win me over, but win me over it does, just as it did fifteen years ago when I was far less well versed in the breadth of cinema than I am today.

Back then, Cage was the worst aspect of the film, because I didn't understand what he was doing. Now, while it's unmistakably still Cher's movie over any else's, I realise how much Cage contributed to its success. Had he not taken a wildly different approach to every actor in the film, I wonder if I'd have enjoyed it anywhere near as much.

I'm realising through this runthrough of his First Thirty that I don't always appreciate the strange choices he makes when approaching a role, but I'm really starting to appreciate that he looks at acting that way.


Seduction.
Romance.
Murder.
The things one does for love.
NICOLAS CAGE
VAMPIRE'S KISS
MARIA CONCHITA ALONSO
JENNIFER BEALS
AND
ELIZABETH ASHLEY
JOHN DALY and DEREK GIBSON Present for † HEMDALE FILM CORPORATION
A MAGELLAN PICTURES Production NICOLAS CAGE "VAMPIRE'S KISS"
MARIA CONCHITA ALONSO JENNIFER BEALS and ELIZABETH ASHLEY Written by JOSEPH MINION
Produced by BARRY SHILS and BARBARA ZITWER Directed by ROBERT BIERMAN
R
DOLBY STEREO
PANAVISION
A FILM FROM HEMDALE
A MAJOR INDEPENDENT

VAMPIRE'S KISS (1988)

DIRECTOR: ROBERT BIERMAN

WRITER: JOSEPH MINION

STARS: NICOLAS CAGE, MARIA CONCHITA ALONSO, JENNIFER BEALS, KASI LEMMONS, BOB LUJAN AND ELIZABETH ASHLEY

OK, this is what I've been waiting for! Never mind all those period dramas and attempts to be a serious actor, this is the true beginning of gonzo Cage, the man who isn't so much acting as deconstructing the very concept of cinema and bending it to his will.

He's Peter Loew, who's some sort of literary agent working in foreign distribution for some company in New York, but that doesn't matter in the slightest. What matters is that he goes mad and very believably so. When this begins and what prompts his descent into madness, I honestly can't say. What's real, I can't say. The therapist he's talking to at the very beginning of the film may not be real. Surely she isn't at the end. Was she ever real and who else in the film is real? Maybe Peter Loew isn't real. Who knows? Not me, that's for sure.

Somehow I've never seen this movie before, even though it's exactly the sort of thing that I ate up in the eighties and nineties. I'm coming to it fresh and at a good time, because Cage is about to release *Renfield*, in which he plays the actual Count Dracula, and the last book I read was Guy N. Smith's *Wolfcurse*, about a man who goes mad because he believes that he's turned into a werewolf.

Mix those two together and you get this, in which Cage and Kari Lemmons, as Jackie, are interrupted during foreplay by a bat flying at them out of nowhere. Loew tells his therapist that he was aroused by his fight with the bat. Next thing you know, he's in bed with Rachel, who bares fangs and bites his neck. From that point on, he starts to believe that he's become a vampire.

What makes this movie special is that Cage goes the extra yard and then some. It's offbeat to start with but, as Cage turns up his sense of surreality, it becomes magnetic.

His antics start simply badly, as if he doesn't have a clue what he's doing, an awful actor in a movie where the only name above the title is his. Then they become comedic, dropping his jaw like a cartoon character as vampire Rachel leads him upstairs to bed, trashing everything in his apartment, screaming into the mirror, "What is happening to me?" But then they get surreal and we're sucked in because we have to know what he's going to do next.

Had this movie been made during the era of Tiktok, it would have gone viral in a heartbeat and become the box office smash it never was, instead gradually building a cult following. It's easy to pick half a dozen scenes to throw out to the wolves of social media as perfect memes of the level of "The bees! The bees!".

He deliberately tries to bug out his eyes in a slew of scenes. He screams the alphabet at his therapist in a frantic version of the kids' song.

He runs through the streets shouting "I'm a vampire!" at everyone he passes. He even buys a pair of cheap plastic fangs and sashays over to a young lady in a disco as if he's Nosferatu.

And, while each of those scenes was shot in what I presume was a controlled environment, he goes even wilder. Instead of the raw egg he was supposed to eat in the actual script, Cage decided it would be more shocking to stuff a cockroach into his mouth, so he did precisely that. And yes, it's shocking. When he stumbles around New York covered in blood, asking the good people of the city to kill him, those aren't all actors. Some of them were homeless people who didn't see the distant camera capturing it all on film.

At points, when the story moves back to an almost rational framework, I wondered about whether it wasn't Peter Loew talking with his therapist, it was actually Alva Restrepo talking with her therapist, because maybe this is her film and he's a sort of Drop Dead Fred in what reads like a psychological thriller.

She's Loew's long suffering secretary, who has at least a dozen serious cases to make in a courtroom against her boss, on a whole slew of grounds, even before he chases her into the basement and rapes her. The big MacGuffin in her story is a contract that some client wants to frame, because it was his first foreign sale. This was decades ago, so it's not easy to find in the files and Loew is adamant that Alva find it, enough that he leaps onto tables to pour scorn on her, chases her into the women's bathroom to demean her, even shows up at her house to guilt her. How she puts up with him, I have no idea, but then that's the point. And that's an unwitting pun that I'm not going to explain.

Cage has said that, to him, this picture was about "a man whose loneliness and inability to find love literally drives him insane."

Joseph Minion, who wrote the script, did so as therapy, unburdening his pain over a toxic relationship with his then-girlfriend, who left him over it during production of a film that she happened to be producing.

To us, it's black comedy with plenty of cult drama, a dab of horror and meme after meme of Cage in batshit insane mode.

What I want to know is what María Conchita Alonso saw it as. To her character, this has to be a Kafka-esque tale of a young office worker trying to do a simple but tedious task that her boss continues to make harder. If he decided that, instead of a vampire, he'd turned into the insect in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, her movie would be pretty much exactly the same.

Cage had made some unusual decisions in a few of his films before this point, but none of them really worked. His decision in *The Boy in Blue* to play a 19th century Canadian sculler in his usual SoCal surfer accent didn't work. His choice to use a high nasal accent sourced from Pokey in *The Gumby Show* as Kathleen Turner's love interest in *Peggy Sue Got Married* didn't work. This, on the other hand, is so utterly out there that it's hard not to watch and harder to not talk about it. It's a good decision, as much as that was debated back in 1988.

And that's the appeal of modern day gonzo Cage. We have no idea what he's going to do in anything and we have to go see his movies in order to find out. That's what truly begins in *Vampire's Kiss*. No wonder this failed at the box office. No wonder it became a cult success.

ELLIOTT KASTNER/ANDRE BLAY in Association with PALISADES ENTERTAINMENT
Presents ELWES/WYMAN PRODUCTION of an ADAM RIFKIN FILM "NEVER ON TUESDAY"
STARRING CLAUDIA CHRISTIAN · ANDREW LAUER · PETER BERG Music by RICHARD STONE
Editor ED ROTHKOWITZ Director of Photography ALAN JONES Associated Producers FRANCES FLEMING
and PAUL KIMATIAN Executive Producer CASSIAN ELWES Produced by BRAD WYMAN
and LIONEL WIGRAM Written and Directed by ADAM RIFKIN
SIMCOM
CBS FOX VIDEO
NEVER ON TUESDAY

NEVER ON TUESDAY (1988)

DIRECTOR: ADAM RIFKIN

WRITER: ADAM RIFKIN

STARS: CLAUDIA CHRISTIAN, ANDY LAUER AND PETER BERG

Here's an unusual and little seen entry into Nicolas Cage's filmography at a time when he made a few of those. Coming off *Moonstruck*, he ought to have been quite a draw, but *Vampire's Kiss* was hardly a mainstream follow up and it doesn't get too much more obscure than this.

Never on Sunday is absolutely packed to the rafters with talent, but it didn't look like it at the time. The star is Claudia Christian, on the back of a magnificent sci-fi/action flick called *The Hidden*. Her co-stars were nobodies back in 1988 but somebodies today. Most of the name recognition, and there's plenty of it, is buried without credits, because a lot of major actors flew out to Borrego Springs for a day each and a brief uncredited cameo, Cage included.

Clearly Adam Rifkin, another nobody at the time who would soon become somebody—he would write *Mouse Hunt* and *Small Soldiers* and direct *Detroit Rock City*—had very little budget to work with, but he found a clever way to use what he had. Two characters are driving from Ohio to California when they crash into the third. Neither car will start and so they're all promptly stuck there, in the middle of the Californian desert, for the entire rest of the picture. Everyone else comes to them.

The two are Matt and Eddie, young men on a quest to conquer the beautiful women they'll find in California. Matt's the driver, played by Andrew Lauer, better known as Andy Lauer to fans of *Caroline in the City*, in which he portrays Charlie. Eddie is the passenger, in the form of Pete Berg, better known to *Chicago Hope* fans as Peter Berg, who plays Dr. Billy Kronk. Both are also directors, Berg in particular knocking out some major titles, like *Battleship*, *Hancock* and *The Rundown*. Lauer runs ReelAid, a non-profit called that produces low or no cost videos for other non-profits. Berg is the creator of *Friday Night Lights* for television.

At this point, Berg was debuting on film and Lauer only had one behind him, *Blame It on the Night*, playing Boy in Audience, so this was his debut in a primary role. Both feel new because the roles demand it. They were in their early twenties but they're playing horny teenagers and they're excellent at being naïve. Christian is shockingly the youngest of the three, albeit only just, because she seems so much mature than these idiot boys who crash into her car.

How much of what follows is real is open to debate. We shouldn't question the crash itself, because Eddie's proud of his hair and Matt has to play with it and so Eddie has to reciprocate and that knocks off Matt's glasses and now he has to slam on the brakes to avoid the VW Bug that's right in front of them. Which he can't.

It could be that Tuesday isn't even real, that being Claudia Christian's character's name. It's not outside possibility that Matt and/or Eddie are about to die and the lives they wish they'd lived are flashing before their eyes. I don't buy that, but it's not dismissable as an idea.

Even if Tuesday is real, not everything that follows is real too, because both boys get their own fantasy scenes with Tuesday, both before and after they discover that she's a lesbian, so isn't ever going to be interested in them, even in the best of circumstances, which this isn't.

However, a little arguing aside, they fall into a rather amicable framework very quickly, one in which Tuesday acts more like a friend they haven't seen in years or some long lost cousin than the lady whose plans for a photoshoot in New York with her girlfriend are now broken. That isn't remotely believable, so these scenes might be imaginary too, even if I'm wondering about who's having them.

If we take it completely straight, which is an increasingly difficult task given the cameos to come, then it's a quiet road but everyone on it is wild and wacky. Every one of them leaves us wondering what just happened, and that only in part because we recognise everyone.

Cage is first up, uncredited as a man in a red sports car. We see the car at 11:20, we see him at 11:40 and both are gone by 12:15. That's less than a minute, even if it seems longer because Cage is in full on surrealist mode. I'm not sure if he's trying to be Cyrano de Bergerac, with a long, pointed prosthetic nose, or Quasimodo, with a bizarre stoop and outrageous hair.

The voice isn't either and I have absolutely no idea who he's trying to be. Never mind his odd accent choice in *Peggy Sue Got Married* and *Vampire's Kiss*, this is notably more outrageous. It's a sort of wussy whisper, hints of surfer dude but only if said surfer dude is in such bad shape that he's breathless just standing up. It's quite the cameo.

At least he offers them a ride, but they don't take it because they don't know they need one yet. A scarily young Gilbert Gottfried doesn't because he just runs through a sales pitch for a device that's four brushes in one, ignoring every attempt they try to interrupt his spiel. He's Lucky Larry Lupin and he's memorable.

Charlie Sheen doesn't just not give them a ride, he also robs them at knifepoint, slowly and methodically, one item at a time. Bizarre acting performance? "In the car!"

An almost unrecognisable Judd Nelson fails to help them too, though he's a motorcycle cop. I'm not sure what he's trying to do either, beyond be drunk on power. It feels like Rifkin didn't tell any of these major actors what to do, beyond to be memorable and every one of them conjured up their own batshit crazy way to do that.

Eventually they get help, because the movie has to finish at some point and ninety minutes in seems like as good a time as any. The pair of backwoods hillbilly tow truck drivers, straight out of *The Dukes of Hazzard*, are Emilio Estevez and Cary Elwes, whose previous movies were *Young Guns* and *The Princess Bride* respectively.

What's perhaps strangest is that I got a real kick out of this movie. I have more cash in my change jar than Rifkin had to spend here and it's almost as widely seen, but he turned out a quirky picture full of memorable moments.

If you can find it, check it out and boggle at the cameos and the dated dialogue. Berg does a particularly solid job delivering deliberately tone deaf lines. "But why?" he responds when Tuesday tells them she's a lesbian. He honestly thinks he can convert her, because it's natural for gay people to turn straight, especially the women, but it's not natural for straight people to turn gay.

Suddenly this film is topical again.

LEO PESCAROLO
RETEITALIA
PRESENTANO
LUCIANO MARTINO
NICOLAS CAGE
IN
TEMPO DI UCCIDERE
CON RICKY TOGNAZZI
PATRICE FLORA PRAXO
E LA PARTECIPAZIONE DI GIANCARLO GIANNINI
REGIA DI GIULIANO MONTALDO
TRATTO DA TEMPO DI UCCIDERE DI ENNIO FLAIANO EDITORE RIZZOLI PRODOTTO DA LEO PESCAROLO E GUIDO DE LAURENTIIS
MUSICHE DI ENNIO MORRICONE
UNA COPRODUZIONE ITALO-FRANCESE ELLEPI FILM ROMA ITALFRANCE PARIGI
UNA PRODUZIONE ELLEPI FILM DANIA FILM SURF FILM DMV DISTRIBUZIONE
CON LA COLLABORAZIONE DI RETEITALIA
UNA ESCLUSIVITA DMV DISTRIBUZIONE
Titanus
DISTRIBUZIONE
DOLBY STEREO
IN TEATRI SCELTI

TIME TO KILL (1989)

DIRECTOR: GIULIANO MONTALDO

WRITERS: FURIO SCARPELLI, PAOLO VIRZÍ, GIACOMO SCARPELLI AND GIULIANO MONTALDO, FROM THE NOVEL BY ENNIO FLAIANO

STARS: NICOLAS CAGE, RICKY TOGNAZZI, PATRICE FLORA PRAXO, GIANLUCA FAVILLA, GEORGES CLAISSE AND ROBERT LIENSOL

After Nicolas Cage's surreal showing in the double whammy of *Vampire's Kiss* and a cameo in *Never on Tuesday*, he shifted yet again to this Italian movie, in which he tones down a great deal and delivers a more natural performance, even though the story follows much the same direction as *Vampire's Kiss*.

Given his recent shenanigans with accents, it ought to help that he's dubbed by an Italian, but it's also not a dialogue-heavy film. That's no bad thing, because the subtitles I found are so poor that they say they're Bulgarian, even though they're actually in some semblance of English. It didn't matter much. It was an easy film to follow and the few verbal nuances that prompt changes in Cage's character's outlook filtered through fine.

It's fair to say that Lt. Enrico Silvestri is not the most obvious part for him to play, but it's pretty clear to me that he was experimenting at this point in his career and welcomed such a different challenge, trying to maintain some sympathy in a character many would consider a villain and to do so in a film that unfolds in a foreign language. Nobody could accuse Cage of playing it easy, since that first picture for his uncle, after which he changed his stage name.

Silvestri is an Italian soldier serving during the Second Italo-Ethiopian War. They'd had a war in the 1890s which the Ethopians won but the Italians returned in 1935 to invade again. This time they won and maintained control of Ethiopia until 1940 when the Allies won it back during their East African campaign during the Second World War.

All of which is background we aren't given here but might help flavour how we take what he does. The first strike against Silvestri is that he's a fascist, literally, serving under Mussolini and his National Fascist Party. The second is that, after leaving camp in quest of a dentist, he rapes an Ethiopian girl he finds bathing in the river. The third is that he kills her shortly afterwards, not the only fatality he adds to his conscience during this movie.

Now, I should add some caveats there.

It's rape to my eyes, as she resists. That she doesn't know the Italian word for "no" should not translate into a default "sì". However, she complies and she doesn't seem too upset about it afterwards, following Silvestri as he moves on, bringing him food, bandaging the gash on his hand and locating a cave in which they can bed down for the night.

It's not murder though, because he aims his pistol at a prowling hyena only for one of the bullets to ricochet into her stomach. It's tragic but it's entirely accidental. Now, that doesn't hold true for what comes later but I'm getting ahead of myself.

Surprisingly, the two details we ought to be focused on are that ugly gash in his hand, the result of a slip down a slope by the river, and the white cloth that she's wrapped around her head. We don't know why they're important at first but the principle of Chekhov's rifle states that the former must be in some way and the meaning of the latter is sprung on us later as a trigger for the rest of the story.

And here's where Cage, who's been decent thus far, seems like a logical casting choice. In Ethiopia, Silvestri discovers, a white cloth around the head signifies that its bearer is suffering from leprosy. And, just like the bat in *Vampire's Kiss* prompts a descent into madness, so does the wound on Silvestri's hand, because he's convinced that Mariam, who's somehow both his victim and his love interest, has given the disease to him unwittingly.

I didn't have any sympathy for Peter Loew in *Vampire's Kiss*, because his treatment of his long suffering secretary is enough to identify him as an asshole. I was shocked to find that I had more sympathy for Enrico Sylvestri. At no point does he warrant that in the slightest. At one point early on, he stumbles on a lizard and promptly sticks a cigarette in its mouth. He's a selfish man and a fascist. We don't need to see him rape someone to look bad in our eyes. He was there already. Somehow, though, Cage is able to elicit some sympathy from us, perhaps by becoming the underdog, gradually painted into a corner but eventually finding at least a little redemption through honest acts.

Everything here is about him. We don't see much of the war, just some of its results in the form of a few corpses and a burned out village. We're given no real background as to why the Italians are in Ethiopia. We're introduced to a short list of characters, many of whom don't even have names, and only exist in this story in relation to Lt. Enrico Silvestri.

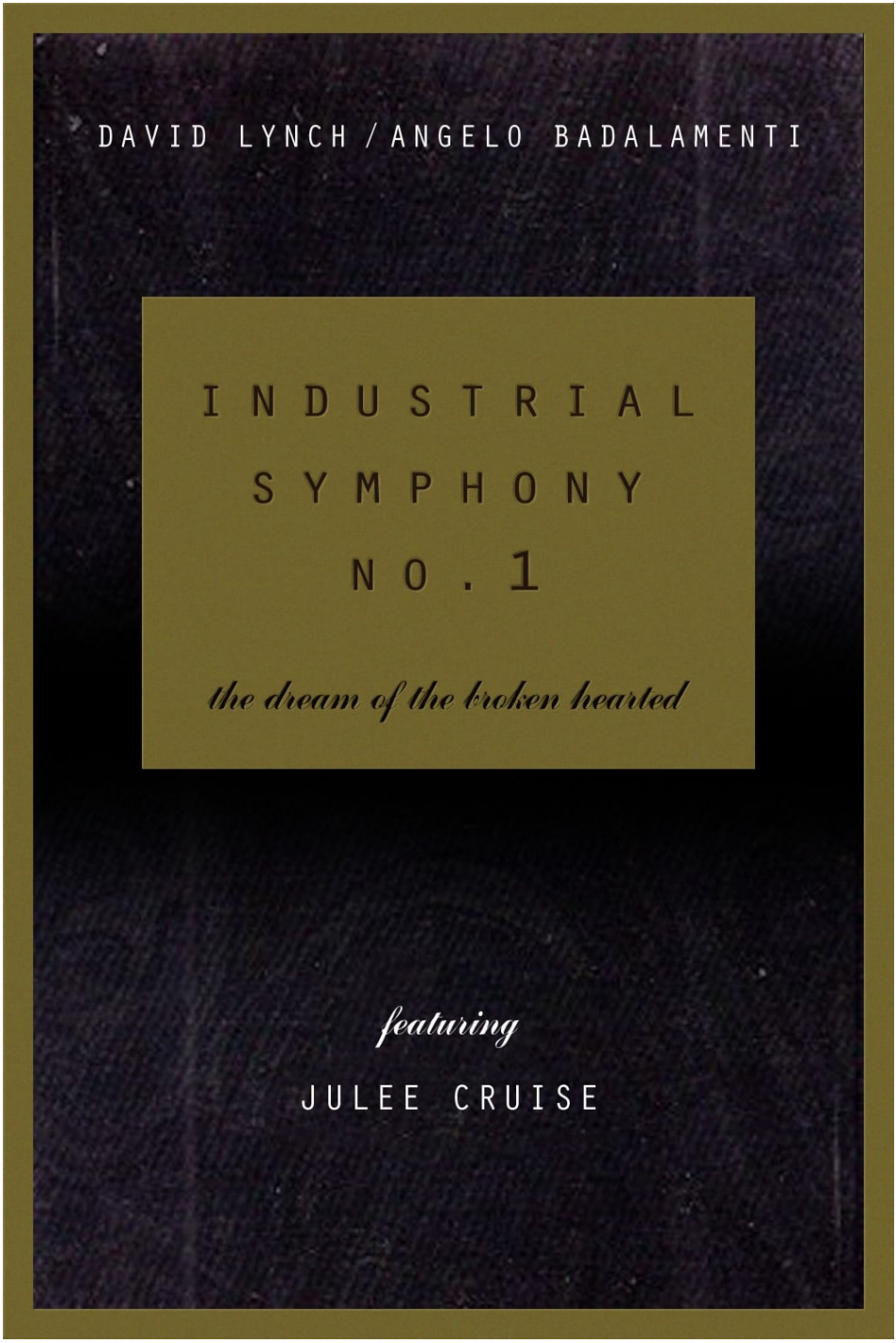
So the focus remains on Cage throughout, as he leaves his appointed place, finds himself in a completely different place with a different culture and language, commits atrocities and eventually leaves. If that isn't a metaphor for colonialism, I'll buy you lunch.

Of course, it's a metaphor for colonialism, so Cage is effectively playing the nation of Italy, which is a heck of a role, one in which he gets his teeth more and more into as the film runs on and he descends into panic and a degree of madness. Eventually, he leaves, when the war ends, as if nothing untoward has happened, no tragedy is left behind in his wake and there's nothing that he needs to atone for. Yes indeed, I can see decent discussions about this movie both in film class and in history class.

There are some startling scenes here, which work well because Cage restrains himself from going full on gonzo. If anything, he plays the mad lieutenant with more subtlety than I can remember him playing, even when he's back in what's left of Mariam's village feverish from a festering untreated wound with nobody to interact with except her father.

This isn't the greatest film ever made but it never loses us and it makes us feel something. I found myself actually wishing that Cage had done more foreign language pictures, because whatever *Time to Kill* is, it isn't Hollywood. It's not slick, it's not clean and it's not trendy. The Nicolas Cage of 1989 would seem to be perfect for films that didn't adhere to norms.

Bizarrely, of course, he delivers a far more normal performance, but it's a good one.


DAVID LYNCH / ANGELO BADALAMENTI
INDUSTRIAL SYMPHONY NO. 1
the dream of the broken hearted
featuring
JULEE CRUISE

INDUSTRIAL SYMPHONY NO. 1: THE DREAM OF THE BROKENHEARTED (1990)

DIRECTOR: DAVID LYNCH

WRITER: DAVID LYNCH

STARS: JULEE CRUISE, LAURA DERN AND NICOLAS CAGE

Just in case *Vampire's Kiss*, *Never on Tuesday* and *Born to Kill* weren't enough of a deviation from the norm, here's a real oddity in Nicolas Cage's career, because it's a concert film not a narrative feature, and a rather strange one.

The three primary players are David Lynch, Angelo Badalamenti and Julee Cruise, a trio of regular collaborators at this point, who made a host of works together in a variety of media.

The title is sourced from a set of geometric mosaics that Lynch created when a student at PAFA, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. He called them Industrial Symphonies, just as he called this an Industrial Symphony, but no other connection is obvious. I assume he liked it enough to turn it into something else, now that he was a big name and could do so.

He wrote it as a play and it was performed at least three times in New York and Montreal. Footage from the New York shows combined for this straight to video release, which runs fifty minutes.

The music is by Badalamenti, known mostly for his collaborations with Lynch, as composer for *Blue Velvet*, *Twin Peaks* and *Mulholland Drive*, with lyrics by Lynch. Many of the vocal pieces are taken from Cruise's debut album, *Floating into the Night*, which they wrote for her.

Her most famous song, taken from the same album, is *Falling*, which was released in single form and, stripped of vocals, became the *Twin Peaks* theme tune, a show in which she played a recurring role as a roadhouse singer.

To introduce the film, Lynch shot a segment featuring Laura Dern and Nicolas Cage, which isn't much longer than his surreal short cameo in *Never on Tuesday*. They aren't together here, because aren't they're in the same place in a metaphorical sense. He's breaking up with her over the phone, leading to his credit being as the Heartbreaker and hers as the Heartbroken Woman. "I'm taking off, baby", he explains to her. "Ain't nothing wrong with you. It's just us I can't handle."

And that's it for them because then we shift to Cruise as the Dreamself of the Heartbroken Woman. So this is what's going through Dern's head after she's dumped by Cage, though it is far from a clear linear narrative. I'm sure that everything has meaning, but it wasn't clear to me except for odd moments featuring telling imagery, like Cruise being locked into the boot of a car or a plethora of plastic babies floating down towards Cruise on stage, then back up to vanish out of sight.

It's certainly striking, Cruise dwarfed by the stage set. which is industrial in outlook, maybe post-apocalyptic, with fallen pillars and a car that's clearly wrecked. The lighting is focused mostly through Klieg lights, so we can't always

tell what's going on except where they shine.

That it's weird and relatively inexplicable didn't surprise me. This is David Lynch, at the point he was shining brightly with *Twin Peaks*. He's a surrealist, "the first populist surrealist" according to Pauline Kael, likely a reason why Cage felt drawn to his work. What we think of this as a multimedia work of art is going to depend entirely on our interpretation of it.

And much of that may depend on what we think of the music. It's an interesting mix and that's what surprised me first because Cruise's style is quintessential dreampop, soft and nice and smooth. After she's performed one vocal number, it shifts into jazzy instrumental with experimental industrial sounds behind it. The balance shifts back and forth, dreampop when Cruise is singing, more jazzy and experimental when she isn't.

I quite liked this odd mixture of styles as the sweetness of the dreampop contrasts with the harshness of some of the jazzy industrial. I'm sure that's part of the point, but the meaning of it all still eludes me. Maybe it's supposed to.

Why, during the first number, Julee Cruise is accompanied by a topless female dancer who gyrates her way around a stack of girders and through the missing back window of the wreck of a car, I have no idea. Why there's also a male dancer, not topless, rolling around as if he's in zero gravity, I have no idea. Is this sex?

I should emphasise that that's just the first number. Lynch has a lot more weirdness than that to throw our way, which ought not to be a surprise to any of you.

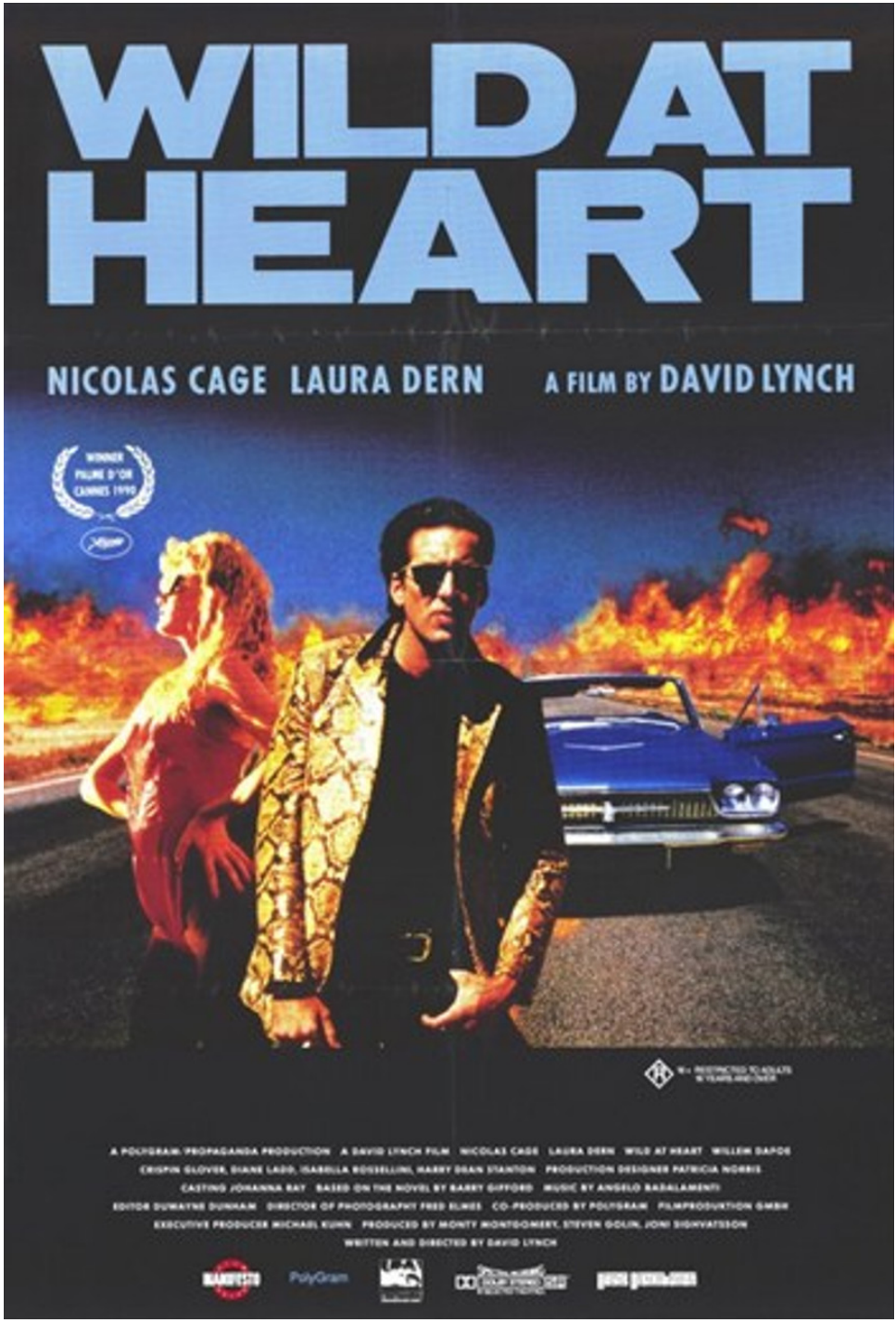
Cruise floats down from the ceiling for her second number, appropriately given that her hauntingly soft voice feels like it's floating in the air even without her body following suit.

Before long, we move sideways to Michael J. Anderson, the 3' 7" Man from Another Place in *Twin Peaks*. He's sawing wood and I don't mean playing violin, in Papa John Creach's famous term; I mean literally sawing wood. Why he's sawing wood and why there's a log there for him to saw, I have no idea. He gets to deliver a spoken word piece later in the film, with the accompaniment of Badalamenti's son André on clarinet.

Later, we meet John Bell, as the Tall Skinned Deer, which is exactly what you think, a giant deer that a host of mechanics stand up on his long legs that are surely stilts. He's without a skin, so he's a *Hellraiser*-esque vision of horror in a film with an otherwise very different tone and, as you've probably guessed, I don't have any idea why.

Even though none of this made any sense to me, I rather enjoyed it. I wonder how much of it will stay with me though. That's often the key with Lynch's work. Sure, some of his films work immediately for me, leaving my jaw dropped in admiration, while others are hard to get through even on a first viewing. What matters the most, though, is how they play to posterity when I think about them later.

I haven't seen *Eraserhead* in a long time, but imagery from it has stayed with me all along. It's even longer since I've seen *Dune* and *The Elephant Man*, but I can see parts of both in my head at the drop of a hat. *Wild at Heart* and *Mulholland Drive*, on the other hand, which I've enjoyed whenever it was that I last watched them, I don't remember at all. I wonder which category this will end up in. At this moment, I'm leaning towards the latter but I'm open to what time brings.


WILD AT HEART
NICOLAS CAGE LAURA DERN
A FILM BY DAVID LYNCH
WINNER PALME D'OR CANNES 1990
A POLYGRAM/PROPAGANDA PRODUCTION A DAVID LYNCH FILM NICOLAS CAGE LAURA DERN WILD AT HEART WILLEM DAFOE
CRISPIN GLOVER, DIANE LADD, ISABELLA ROSSELLINI, HARRY DEAN STANTON PRODUCTION DESIGNER PATRICIA NORRIS
CASTING JOHANNA RAY BASED ON THE NOVEL BY BARRY GIFFORD MUSIC BY ANGELO BADALAMENTI
EDITOR DUWAYNE DUNHAM DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY FRED ELMES CO-PRODUCED BY POLYGRAM FILMPRODUKTION GMBH
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER MICHAEL KUHN PRODUCED BY MONTY MONTGOMERY, STEVEN GOLIN, JONI SIGHVATSSON
WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY DAVID LYNCH
PolyGram

WILD AT HEART (1990)

DIRECTOR: DAVID LYNCH

WRITER: DAVID LYNCH, BASED ON THE NOVEL BY BARRY GIFFORD

STARS: NICOLAS CAGE, LAURA DERN, WILLEM DAFOE, J. E. FREEMAN, CRISPIN GLOVER, DIANE LADD, CALVIN LOCKHART, ISABELLA ROSSELLINI, HARRY DEAN STANTON AND GRACE ZABRISKIE

As I started to wonder about how *Industrial Symphony No. 1* would play in my brain over a period of time, I moved onto *Wild at Heart*, one of the David Lynch films that I've seen before and yet don't remember much about. Mostly it seems to have blurred into the period's array of movies about adult couples running away from everything and getting into all sorts of trouble. Then again, I remember much more about *Natural Born Killers* and *Thelma and Louise*.

This particular couple are Sailor and Lula, in the forms of Nicolas Cage and Laura Dern, the couple whose phone call break up is the start to *Industrial Symphony*. Here, there's no chance of a breakup, because they're head over heels in love with each other, to the disdain of her mother, who is as mad as a hatter and almost as outrageous about it as the Red Queen.

It's a constant amazement that mother and daughter are played by mother and daughter, because Marietta Fortune is Diane Ladd, who's Laura Dern's mother both on and off screen. The longer the film lasts, the more Lula strips off for more sex scenes with Sailor, the more of a grotesque embarrassment Marietta turns into and the more we wonder how these two actors must have felt at the première as they sat there watching each other's performances.

To be fair, both performances are magnetic and Ladd was deservedly Oscar nominated for her work, though she lost to Whoopi Goldberg for *Ghost*. For all that Sailor and Lula are who we're supposed to follow, while they interact with a whole succession of quirky characters played by greatly talented supporting actors, it seems unfair to suggest that Marietta is just the first of them. She drives this plot far more than Sailor and Lula do.

We gradually learn the reasons why in a set of flashback scenes that flesh out a number of back stories, but it's clear right off the bat that Marietta wants Sailor dead. In fact, she hires a man named Bobby Ray Lemon to kill him, but Sailor bludgeons him to death instead. That's why he only spends 22 months and 18 days in the Pee Dee Correctional Institute because he goes down for manslaughter not murder.

We fast forward through his jail time, just as we did in *Raising Arizona*, so that Lula can pick him up, against her mother's strict orders, and hand him his snakeskin jacket and go dancing at a thrash metal concert and... well, let's just say that plenty of things happen because she's unwilling to listen to her mad mum.

The question is how we're supposed to take all these things that happen, because Lynch is a surrealist and, as we've learned, so is Cage. It shouldn't surprise that this departs from any semblance of our reality pretty quickly.

When that happens for you will depend on you, but for me it was at that concert. You see, there are a number of themes here that Lynch

weaves constantly into his script, so we're not far from at least one of them at any point. The first is fire, because that rages throughout the opening credits, but there's also *The Wizard of Oz* and Elvis Presley, suggesting that this is as much a fantasy as it is a road movie or any of the other genres it drives through.

And, having attended plenty of thrash metal gigs, even if Powermad didn't play at any of them, what happens at this concert is utter lunacy. Sailor and Lula are letting their hair down, which for him means Elvis Presley kung fu kicks and for her means getting flirted with. Sailor takes that poorly and has the band stop playing just so he can force this poor soul into an apology. If that wasn't enough, he takes the microphone and leads a thrash metal band in a rendition of Elvis's *Love Me*. This is sheerest fantasy, of course. The question is whose.

In other hands, this would fail quickly and horribly and *Wild at Heart* was not universally lauded in 1990. There were a lot of walkouts at early screenings, including at Cannes, where it controversially won the Palme d'Or. But Lynch is good at this and Cage was getting better. In fact, taking on this role of "a kind of romantic Southern outlaw" was a perfect choice. Unlike *Peggy Sue Got Married* or *Vampire's Kiss*, when he did outrageous things amongst a cast that had no intention of following suit, here the entire cast does outrageous things and he's far from the most outrageous of them.

Even when his dialogue is outrageous, as it generally tends to be, he plays it straighter than other actors. The "idiot punk", as he's credited, at the Powermad gig, makes fun of his "stupid jacket." "This is a snakeskin jacket," replies Sailor, repeating an earlier line that "for me, it's a symbol of my individuality and my belief in personal freedom."

There are plenty of unrealistic lines that he delivers utterly straight, like "I guess I started smoking when I was about four. My momma was already dead then from lung cancer." He's clearly enjoying every one of them.

But he's not as outrageous as any of the wild variety of memorable faces and bodies Lynch throws at the screen, right down to uncredited actors. Crispin Glover is memorable. Sherilyn Fenn is memorable. Harry Dean Stanton, as he tends to be, is memorable. A pair of assassins appear as a tall black guy with a creepy smile and a woman with a club leg. One random bar patron squeaks like a duck. A couple of hotel detectives are geriatics who can hardly walk.

This extends to signs, places, especially Big Tuna, Texas, which is where we meet Willem Dafoe, who frankly would have stolen this film if Diane Ladd wasn't in it. He is as outrageous as we expect Nicolas Cage to be and he's eager and twisted to boot. Bobby Peru is functional in ways that Marietta Fortune isn't, but both of them are utterly broken as human beings.

After all, "This whole world's wild at heart and weird on top," as Lula says. Lynch brings the weird in a thousand different ways. Sailor is the wild at heart, even more than Lula, who tries to be, and Cage does a great job at flying free, even though he's locked up twice.

Interestingly, Dern and Cage took the view that they were playing the same character, in male and female forms. That puts mad mama in a completely different light!

I can't say that I was sold on this, and I rated it lower than I did last time out, back in 2005, but it's a visual treat and quite the experience. It just seems that it makes less sense the more I understand.

"A ROUSING, ROCK-'EM-SOCK-'EM AERIAL ADVENTURE.
If you enjoyed Top Gun, you'll have a great time!"
—Sneak Previews/PBS, Michael Medved
NICOLAS CAGE
TOMMY LEE JONES
SEAN YOUNG
FIRE BIRDS
TOUCHSTONE PICTURES
NOVA INTERNATIONAL FILMS
KEITH BARISH/ARNOLD KOPELSON
DAVID GREEN
BRYAN KESTNER
DAVID NEWMAN
JON POLL
NORMAN BUCKLEY
JOSEPH T. GARRITY
TONY IMI, B.S.C.
JOHN K. SWENSSON
DALE DYE
RICHARD T. STEVENS
STEP TYNER
NICK THIEL
PAUL F. EDWARDS
ARNOLD KOPELSON
KEITH BARISH
WILLIAM BADALATO
DAVID GREEN
PG-13
TOUCHSTONE HOME VIDEO

FIRE BIRDS (1990)

DIRECTOR: DAVID GREEN

WRITERS: STEP TYNER & JOHN K. SWENSSON AND DALE DYE

STARS: NICOLAS CAGE, TOMMY LEE JONES AND SEAN YOUNG

For a movie released in 1990, this could not have looked more eighties if it had tried, with its War on Drugs helicopter porn, the whirring blades and gleaming black flanks of horribly beweaponed American military choppers shot against the sun at every possible opportunity. Add Nicolas Cage playing Jake Preston playing Tom Cruise playing Pete "Maverick" Mitchell and it's about as derivative as it gets.

It's too easy to call it a *Top Gun* ripoff. Yes, it is, but it has all the dramatic depth of a single episode of *Airwolf* padded out to 86 minutes. It really is one of those movies you can write in your head scene by scene before any of them happen.

Let me take you back in the day, just in case you're too young to remember. It's a game of good and bad.

What's bad? Well, drugs are bad and South American cartels are really bad. We don't see an ounce of drugs outside of a news broadcast, though, and we don't see any cartel members either, as they're distilled down to one highly talented pilot and mercenary killer in his fast Scorpion tactical assault helicopter. He's Eric Stoller, the face to this MacGuffin.

What's good? Well, the good ol' U.S. of A. is good, of course, and George Bush Sr., its tough on crime president who's quoted at the very beginning of the film. The U.S. military is good too, because they're the president's right arm of violence who, with the right training and a hefty amount of that sleek xenomorph black flying tech, can save the world from terrorist drug dealing commie scumbuckets. You know, the ones who listen to albums with a "parental guidance" sticker on the front. They probably play D&D and grow their hair long and protest for civil rights. The traitors.

Cage is front and centre for the whole damn movie and his story arc is clear from his very first scene. He's in South America, supporting the local anti-drug forces and his outfit meets Eric Stoller and his Scorpion death machine. It has to be said that not everyone who went out came back and Jake Preston pleads his case to the top brass in the most clichéd and patriotic way possible because "they're heroes and they should be avenged."

We're six and a half minutes in and that's all we need to write the entire rest of the script. Let's see now.

The military are well aware that the cartels are better funded and better equipped, so they set up a program to match Stoller's helicopter with bigger helicopters and better helicopters, which means a host of Apache twin-turboshaft attack helicopters that look badass shimmying out of the sun behind the opening credits.

Who are they going to send to Fort Mitchell to be part of that program? You're spot on. It's Jake Preston, ladies and gentlemen, who has a pair of aviator sunglasses and cocky grin. He's so damn good that he aces the simulations on

ludicrous level while shouting to anyone who might be watching, "I am the greatest!"

Ah, but he has to have a flaw. How about he can't handle the lights out mode because he has an eye dominance problem and can't deal with the computer sighting system. Our great white hope is going to flunk out.

But wait! There's going to be someone here at Fort Mitchell who can resist his charm and that'll be some ex-girlfriend who's a bitchin' helicopter scout (c'mon, she has to be at least a level below the guys) and she's a tough and independent feminist chick who moans about neanderthal men but still ends up as a damsel in distress calling for Jake to save her.

Oh, and a mentor too, with a jovial Tommy Lee Jones sort of toughness, so that between him and the ex, they'll find a cool way to help Jake conquer his one and only problem so that he can stay in the program, fly back down to the Catamarca Desert at just the right moment and wreak vengeance for his buddy and the whole goddamn country too by shooting down Eric Stoller's Scorpion bitch chopper in aerial conflict like a real badass patriotic hero.

Oh, sorry, did I spoil anything? I left a whole bunch of stuff out and you can write that too. I guarantee that there's nothing in this feature that will surprise you.

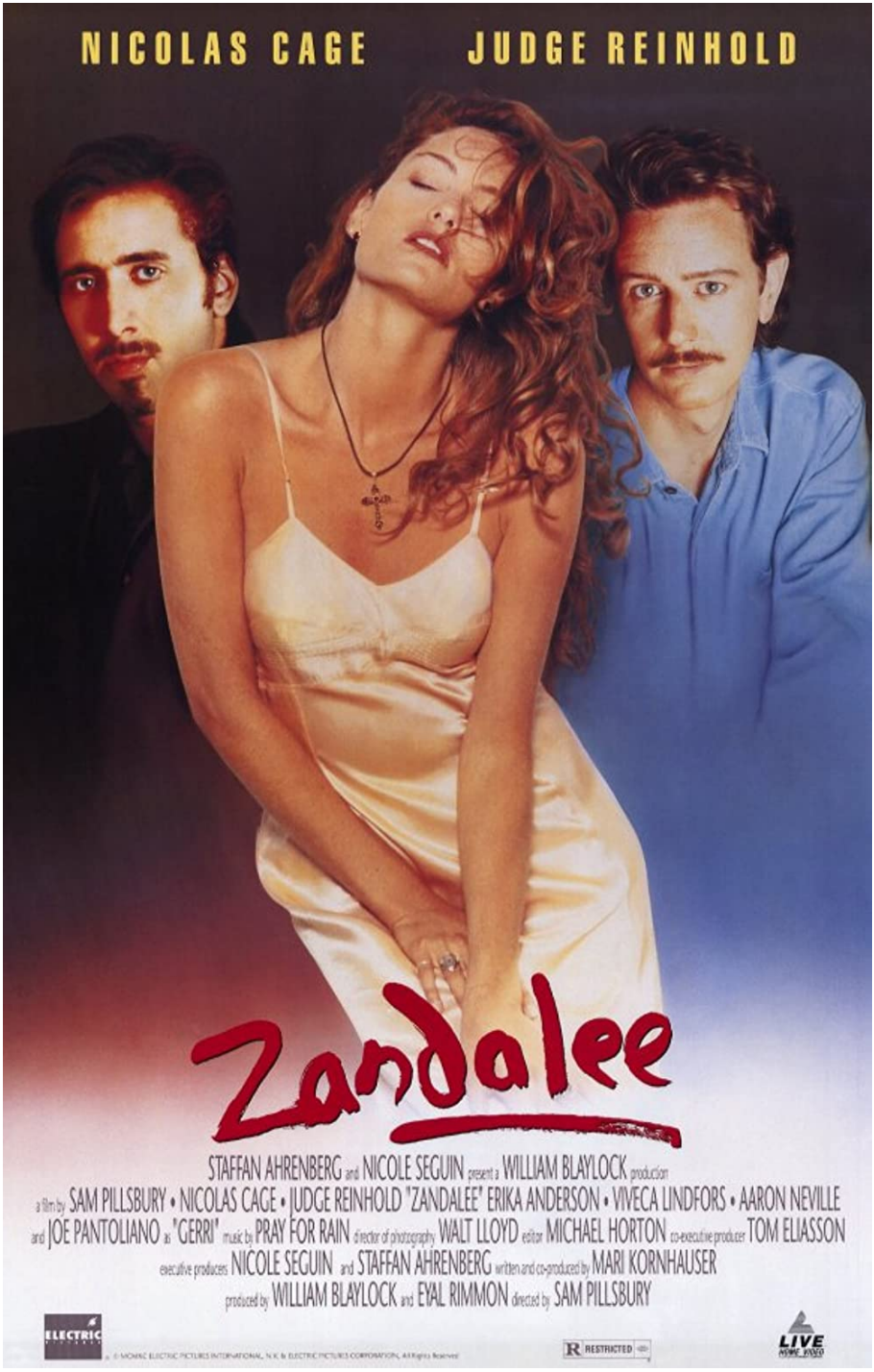
You already know that Nicolas Cage has the Tom Cruise role. The ex-girlfriend, Billie Lee Guthrie, is Sean Young, her short dark hair the icing on that particular cake. Oh, and who did they get to play the Tommy Lee Jones mentor? How about Tommy Lee Jones himself! And yes, he steals every single scene in this film with a singular and utterly effortless charm. Sure, he could do this in his sleep but he would sell it in his sleep too.

To be fair, Cage gets better as the film runs on. And he has to because he's awful in those opening scenes, testifying to the generals. He spouts outrageous War on Drugs propaganda, appropriately for a character who believes the guff that comes out of his mouth—America!—but it's painfully obvious that Cage doesn't. He doesn't even try to be believable; he just goes all dead eyed as if he can't believe the dialogue that he's been given.

But he gets better, when he turns into cocky Maverick lite. He's not even close to what Tom Cruise did with the same part, but he's miscast rather than awful. He was at his best playing a varied assortment of misfits and weirdos. The All-American poster boy was just not right for him. Fortunately Tommy Lee Jones is here to save everyone's ass, because he's perfect.

In *Age of Cage*, biographer Keith Phipps is of the opinion that the turn of the decade was a paradigm shift for American film, as it was for American music. Cage had been doing weirdo movies, cameos in indies and obscure features abroad, so was out of the public eye. Now was the time to see what worked, so he tried a few very diferent parts. This one was the patriotic American hero experiment and it was a bust. Oh well, no worries. What's next?

I can't say that I disliked *Fire Birds*. It's easy to like. In fact, it's too easy to like because that is all it has going for it. If it had been a B movie that cost a million bucks, it could have been a fun rental with pizza and beer. But it cost $22 million because it was supposed to be an A list blockbuster. And, on that level, it failed, as did Cage and everyone else in the cast and crew not named Tommy Lee Jones.


NICOLAS CAGE
JUDGE REINHOLD
Zandalee
STAFFAN AHRENBERG and NICOLE SEGUIN present a WILLIAM BLAYLOCK production
a film by SAM PILLSBURY • NICOLAS CAGE • JUDGE REINHOLD "ZANDALEE" ERIKA ANDERSON • VIVECA LINDFORS • AARON NEVILLE
and JOE PANTOLIANO as "GERRI" music by PRAY FOR RAIN director of photography WALT LLOYD editor MICHAEL HORTON co-executive producer TOM ELIASSON
executive producers NICOLE SEGUIN and STAFFAN AHRENBERG written and co-produced by MARI KORNHAUSER
produced by WILLIAM BLAYLOCK and EYAL RIMMON directed by SAM PILLSBURY
ELECTRIC
RESTRICTED
LIVE

ZANDALEE (1991)

DIRECTOR: SAM PILLSBURY

WRITER: MARI KORNHAUSER

STARS: NICOLAS CAGE, JUDGE REINHOLD AND ERIKA ANDERSON

I let *Zandalee* sit for a few days to percolate inside my brain before putting pen to virtual paper, because I wanted to be fair and not let instant impressions rule the day. But it didn't matter. I don't just dislike this movie. I found it abhorrent.

Now, it's a tragedy, so don't expect to go in and have a grand old time, but we're supposed to build up to tragedies, enjoy moments before the worst thing happens and then we can feel the heartbreak. Here, I felt the tragedy begin at the beginning and keep on escalating until the end. That's not an emotional rollercoaster. It's a steady slide into the abyss.

The Zandalee of the title is a young lady, an attractive and sensual young lady who strips off about ten seconds into the film and shows us everything she has, dancing around in her apartment on Bourbon Street in New Orleans. She's played by Erika Anderson and her beauty is one of the few good things about this movie.

Zandalee is married to Thierry Martin, in a surprisingly adult role for Judge Reinhold. I'm used to seeing him in teen comedies. The last time I saw him was in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, in a scene with Nicolas Cage as a silent backdrop. This isn't remotely a teen comedy.

Thierry is struggling with himself, because he's a poet, a published poet at that with one book at least to his name, but he's now a vice president at his father's company, Southern Comm, which does something corporate.

The theme of the film is about being true to yourself and Thierry isn't. He's sold his soul to the corporate world and he's paying the price in literal impotence. He has a beautiful young wife dancing around naked and he can't get it up to satisfy her. He doesn't have time for this. I don't have time for his southern accent. We all see an easy solution to his troubles but he's not going to follow it and therein lies the first tragedy.

Of course, if a sensual young thing living in the French Quarter can't get what she needs at home, she's going to go elsewhere, and it takes very little time for us to figure out where. You guessed it, Nicolas Cage wanders into a party like an Elvis silhouette in his mullet and boots and the second tragedy starts warming up.

He's Johnny Collins, an artist who grew up on the same street as Thierry. He got his own chance to sell out but he refused it. "If I can't paint," he says, "everything just turns to shit." So he paints and he smokes and, when he isn't working his day job at Thierry's company as a grunt, he pursues Zandalee with no shame.

And I do mean no shame. He kisses her with passion in her own apartment, with Thierry in the next room talking to his grandma. A scene or two later and he's waiting for her outside. "We're inevitable," he informs her. "I want to shake you naked and eat you alive." She tells him to get lost. He talks her into taking off her knickers in the rain, going back to his studio

and opening her legs for him.

Sure, he has artistry and passion, but he's a bastard when we meet him and he gets worse from there. It isn't long before he screws her in Thierry's laundry room during dinner with family and guests. He even follows her to her church and screws her in the confessional. He may have his artistic soul intact but it's not much of a soul.

The problem is that, while Johnny is clearly never going to elicit any sympathy from us in the cheap seats, unless we're incels who tune into his weird dominance fantasies so we can get off on a beautiful woman being degraded, nobody else is worth it either.

Zandalee doesn't start this and she makes a few token efforts to stop Johnny, but she could have actually done that and she doesn't. She's utterly complicit in the whole thing. So we're left with Thierry, right? Wrong. I wouldn't say that he deserves everything he gets because nobody should have to go through this, but I couldn't care less about him either.

There are a total of two characters whom I felt deserved some respect.

The first is Tatta, Thierry's grandmother, in the form of Viveca Lindfors, a Swedish actor of the classic era who clearly hadn't lost any of the power she'd been demonstrating in films ever since the forties. She's excellent here and she nails the tough scene she has late on.

The other is Gerri, played by Joe Pantoliano in drag. He hangs around the vintage clothing store that Zandalee presumably runs, helping her out here and there and clearly caring for her in ways that nobody else in this film does. I'm not sure if he's a transvestite, she's a drag queen always in character or they're trans, but it's a rivetting supporting performance and, in the end, when everything goes totally south, it was Gerri I felt acute sympathy for.

I struggled with this film from the outset. It seemed like it was eager to objectify women, but it was written by one, Mari Kornhauser, who's a creative writing professor. After the fact, I learned that it's a retelling of an Émile Zola novel called *Thérèse Raquin*, transformed into a contemporary New Orleans story.

As it went on, I just felt less and less reason to continue. I finished the film, because I'm a professional and I'm not going to quit on you, but it became quite the slog. Sure, Anderson is pleasing to the eyes but a movie needs more than a beautiful leading lady to work.

There were only two scenes that I enjoyed in more than a purely visual sense. The first is a minor scene featuring a minor character, an unnamed prisoner on a work program in the city played by Steve Buscemi. We've seen him a few times, but this scene has him run down a street with a stolen TV, only to be grabbed and carried away, his feet climbing up a shop front in a failed attempt to resist. The second comes late on, when the tragedy is about to escalate, but Cage and a drunk Reinhold literally dance together at the coast and it's a moment of joy.

Does Cage do a bad job here? No, I wouldn't say that. He's there to be a devil, a dangerous option for a lonely lady who should know a lot better than to fall for him, and he's exactly that. He lives for his passions. In some ways, he's Ronny from *Moonstruck*, just as an artist in New Orleans rather than a baker in New York, but still all overblown operatic melodrama. Of course, Ronny was a good man who's not good to himself while Johnny's a bad man who's not good to anyone else.

I know which of those two that I'd prefer to hang with and which I'd prefer to watch. And neither of them are Johnny Collins.

A comedy
about one bride, two grooms,
and 34 flying Elvises.
James Caan
Nicolas Cage
Sarah Jessica Parker
HONEYMOON IN VEGAS
CASTLE ROCK ENTERTAINMENT in association with NEW LINE CINEMA presents A LOBELL/BERGMAN Production An ANDREW BERGMAN Film
JAMES CAAN · NICOLAS CAGE · SARAH JESSICA PARKER "HONEYMOON IN VEGAS" PAT MORITA Music by DAVID NEWMAN Costumes Designed by JULIE WEISS
Edited by BARRY MALKIN Production Designer WILLIAM A. ELLIOTT Director of Photography WILLIAM A. FRAKER, A.S.C. Executive Producer NEIL MACHLIS
Produced by MIKE LOBELL Written and Directed by ANDREW BERGMAN
CASTLE ROCK
NEW LINE CINEMA

HONEYMOON IN VEGAS (1992)

DIRECTOR: ANDREW BERGMAN

WRITER: ANDREW BERGMAN

STARS: JAMES CAAN, NICOLAS CAGE, SARAH JESSICA PARKER AND PAT MORITA

So I've seen a bunch of Nicolas Cage movies, even before this project, and now I've seen a bunch more and I'm only now starting to learn that the man is a comedian. Who knew?

Thus far in this First Thirty, my favourite of Cage's films is *Raising Arizona*. This is now the second on the list, because James Caan handles the acting and Sarah Jessica Parker looks good and that leaves Cage to provide the fun, which he does in spades because he's on the run for a majority of this film, trying to catch up to the rich and powerful and get his girl back, failing at every step but succeeding in the end. Like it wasn't obvious from the synopsis?

He's Jack Singer here, who promises his mad mother—a brief but memorable Anne Bancroft cameo—the moment she dies that he won't get married. Ever. Fast forward four years and he loves Betsy Nolan to bits and she wants to tie the knot. What's a poor sucker to do?

Well, what he shouldn't do is take her all the way from New York to Las Vegas to take her hand in holy matrimony, but get distracted by a clearly crooked poker game for new guests at Bally's and lose to the bigshot pro gambler Tommy Korman. And I mean lose and lose big. He doesn't just drop the $500 in spare change he came in with. He's into Korman to the tune of $65,000 when he lays down a straight flush to the jack and Korman shows him the same to the queen. Oh deary dear. What's a poor man to do?

Well, Korman offers a way out because he's caught sight of him with Betsy and Betsy is the spitting image of Donna, Korman's dead wife. So he suggests that he'll cancel every bit of that $65,000 if Jack will give him Betsy for the weekend.

And now we have a movie because, as wild as this idea is, what other options do this poor couple have?

Caan is fun as Korman, schmoozing Betsy in style, flaunting his wealth and being quite the gentleman. By the time he proposes marriage to her, in Hawaii, she's actually considering it. Sure, he sneaks a few outright lies in there to keep himself way above Jack in her estimation. It wasn't $65,000, he says. It was a mere $300. And it wasn't his idea. Jack suggested it. Yeah right, dude, but Betsy doesn't know any better. And Tommy Korman knows how to read and play people. It's his livelihood.

Parker is fun as Betsy too. I've never been a big fan of hers, but she has a light and breezy approach here and it works. It's far from the most substantial role she's ever played and it's hardly asking much of her talent, but she does a good job nonetheless.

And, with quick praise for supporting actors Robert Castanzo, Seymour Cassel, Peter Boyle, Pat Morita and especially Burton Gilliam, that leaves Cage as the young man who suddenly finds himself without the love of his life on the very weekend he'd finally decided to commit

himself to her and, very possibly, about to lose her for good. How can he compete?

Well, for a while he doesn't have a clue how to compete but eventually he decides that he has to go and find her, wherever she is right now, and be himself, which is very likely the best choice. If he can catch up with them. And there's no guarantee that he will with Korman tasking a large entourage with keeping him as far away from them as possible.

But he tries, which is endearing. I felt more for Cage's character in the first scene of this film than I did in the entirety of *Zandalee*, with *Fire Birds* thrown in for good measure. I loved his goofiness in *Raising Arizona*, but he's more sympathetic in this picture while being just as dedicated to his goal.

Oh, and did I mention the theme that's been floating around behind the leads? The theme of Elvis Presley, the King of Rock 'n' Roll? It's clear that Cage is a big fan and I didn't need to revisit *Wild at Heart* to notice that. There were nods in *Peggy Sue Got Married* and *Zandalee* too and I'd swear on oath that he's performed the patented Elvis kung fu kicks in others as well.

So, when we realise that there's some sort of Elvis competition going on at Bally's, it isn't too hard to figure out that Cage is going to get himself into an Elvis jumpsuit at some point in proceedings. Sure enough, he does, but in the most memorable way imaginable. We can't not pay attention at that point in the movie, even after a succession of unlikely Elvises, many of them performing the hits, from Asian Elvis to eight year old Elvis via Black Elvis. There's an Asian Elvis right there at the poker table with them, watching Jack get fleeced. The buggers get everywhere. And yes indeed, they do, but I'm not going to spoil where we end up, even if the poster kind of does that before you ever get round to pressing play.

Cage is at his most watchable here, the film outrageous but him not so much. He's willing, very wisely, to let the surreality wash over the screen and just play along with it. The laughs are going to come, because the script is good enough to pull them out of us. He doesn't need to force anything.

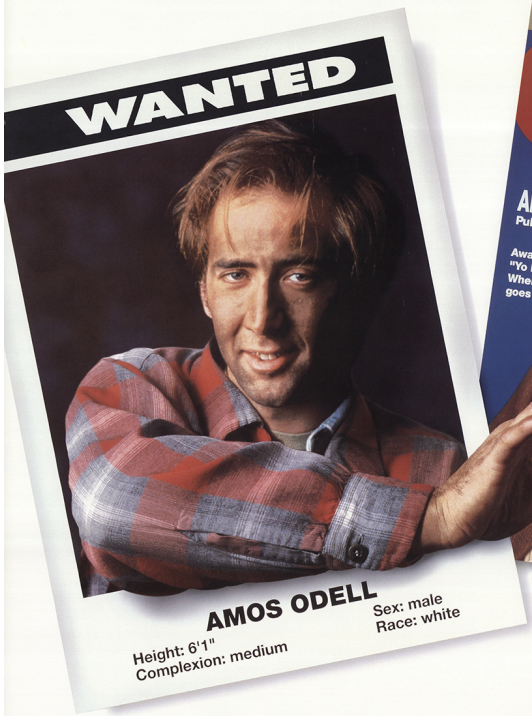
And that script is by Andrew Bergman, who also directed the film. He's not a name I knew, but I knew his work. He wrote one of the best comedies of all time, possibly the very best, in *Tex X*, though we know it better in its eventual form as *Blazing Saddles*. No wonder there are a number of Mel Brooks regulars here. He wrote *Fletch* (but not *Fletch Lives*), *The Freshman* and others. I should seek out more of them. This is lesser to those but still wildly surreal and very funny. The man knows his stuff.

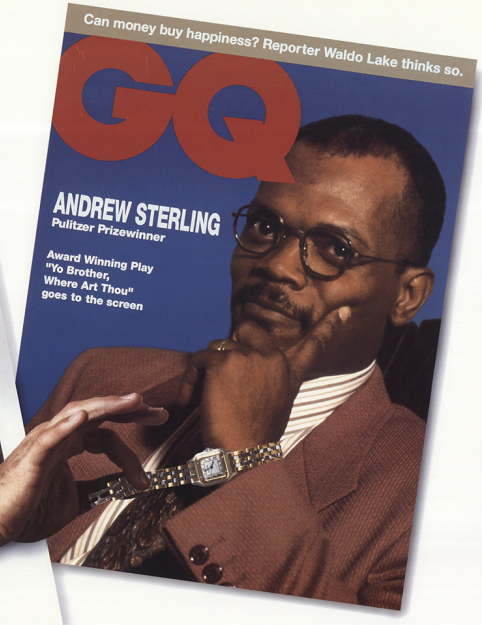
I'll see another of his films soon, because it's *It Could Happen to You*, another romcom drama starring Nicolas Cage, this time from 1994 with Bridget Fonda as his romantic lead. Cage must have realised quickly how well this worked, as there are only four other pictures in between this and that. At a rough guess, none of them are this funny.

All this makes me wonder how many coms Cage ended up making, with or without a rom prefix. This isn't the greatest ever made but it works and it works very well indeed. It's light and fluffy, but it has depth and heart and the imagination to remain fresh throughout. I'm well aware that there are great Cage roles and great Cage films to come that don't play in this ballpark, but right now I don't care.

Sports
THE LOST WEEKEND
PLAY POST SECOND CHANCE
cruise ship sinks off S. Africa

NICOLAS CAGE SAMUEL L. JACKSON





Amos & Andrew

CASTLE ROCK ENTERTAINMENT IN ASSOCIATION WITH NEW LINE CINEMA PRESENTS A MAX FRYE PICTURE NICOLAS CAGE SAMUEL L. JACKSON "AMOS & ANDREW"
MICHAEL LERNER MARGARET COLIN BRAD DOURIF AS "DONALDSON" AND DABNEY COLEMAN MUSIC BY RICHARD GIBBS EDITOR JANE KURSON PRODUCTION DESIGNER PATRICIA NORRIS
CASTLE ROCK DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY WALT LLOYD CO-PRODUCED BY JACK CUMMINS AND MARSHALL PERSINGER PRODUCED BY GARY GOETZMAN WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY E. MAX FRYE COLUMBIA PICTURES

At Theatres This February

NSS 930011 PRINTED IN U.S.A.

AMOS & ANDREW (1993)

DIRECTOR: E. MAX FRYE

WRITER: E. MAX FRYE

STARS: NICOLAS CAGE, SAMUEL L. JACKSON,
MICHAEL LERNER, MARGARET COLIN, GIANCARLO ESPOSITO,
BOB BALABAN, BRAD DOURIF AND DABNEY COLEMAN

Yeah, this didn't look promising! Knowingly going into a project with a title like this firmly suggests poor judgement and, while it plays a lot better than I expected that it would, it's a wildly ill-advised film.

For those young enough to not see the issue, there was a massively popular radio show that ran from 1928 to 1960 called *Amos 'n' Andy*. The characters were all black, but it was created, written and acted by two white men. Needless to say, it was protested before it ever made the jump to television in the fifties, which finally ended under NAACP pressure. At least the TV actors were black but the voices were still the white creators. While this was an important radio show, it isn't remembered fondly.

So here's a 1993 riff on *Amos 'n' Andy*, where Amos is white and Andy is black and the whole film is a look at American race relations. Done as a comedy. OK then...

Nicolas Cage is Amos Odell, an idiotic white thief who starts the film in jail on a rich resort island in Massachusetts because he somehow mistook it for Canada. His first action is to get his handcuffs removed so he can make his one phone call. He orders takeout.

Samuel L. Jackson is Andrew Sterling, a rich black playwright—the best joke may be that he won a Pulitzer for *Yo Brother, Where Art Thou*—and he starts the film looking at the very same island over the side of a ferry. He's just bought a holiday home on the island and he's heading there for a first night in his new property.

Let's just say that it doesn't go remotely as well as he might have hoped. In fact, if you try to guess how badly it could go for an unknown black man on a rich white island, you'll still come up short.

Well, that's if you're white. If you're black, this is going to seem completely predictable. I would suggest that the only way to watch this is in a small multi-racial group of friends who can watch each other's reactions in real time.

It starts as of course it starts with a call to the cops. The Gillmans, Phil and Judy, are out walking their dogs when they see the lights on next door, decide to say hi to neighbours and find instead some black man poking around in their house, so... and here's where you need to start watching the faces of your multi-racial viewing party.

It doesn't help that Brad Dourif is so good at being a dipshit cop.

Quick aside: Brad Dourif is so good at being anyone, I need to schedule his First Thirty at some point. Quick further aside: I'll do Samuel L. Jackson's before Dourif's, as he's the highest grossing actor ever (ignoring Stan Lee) and yet he was top billed in only two of his first thirty films: *National Lampoon's Loaded Weapon 1* with

Emilio Estevez and this. *Pulp Fiction* was #32.

What Dourif does here is stupidly escalate a scenario that's already stupidly escalated and he does it in quintessential style. He's Officer Donnie Donaldson, the dumbest of the dumb cops who surround Sterling's new house with no knowledge that he's bought the place. He puts on blackface—camouflage!—then bumps into Sterling's car, setting off the alarm. As Sterling tries to switch it off, Donaldson thinks his key fob is a gun and opens fire. After it all calms down, he bumps into the car again and shoots the damn thing to make it stop.

And then Police Chief Cecil Tolliver, who's standing for County Commissioner, picks up a phone and calls the house, realises the mistake and panics. His bright idea to escape from this mess of his own making is to hire Amos Odell—remember him?—to break in, hold Sterling hostage, give himself up and then leave, with the promise of a ticket to Canada, budding PR nightmare no further concern.

And if you think that's going to work, I have a bridge in Brooklyn to sell you.

I have to admit that this is better than I had any right to expect it to be. That does not, and I repeat not, mean that it's a good film. If the script took itself seriously and played this out as a drama, maybe Cage and Jackson could be a modern day match for Tony Curtis and Sidney Poitier in 1958's *The Defiant Ones*, although that film had added depth in the fact that the two characters hated each other to begin with and that isn't the case here. They're just confused.

However, this script is very clearly comedy and probably deliberately so, to minimise the rampant potential for upsetting the audience in a very different time. That's why this film, which is all about race, features precious few overt racists. The Chief does drop the N word, but even there he may be doing it for effect as a role he's playing in the moment. He's not the sort of racist we saw in films about race in the fifties and sixties. This is about quiet racism.

And it's all about how white guys see black guys and how black guys see white guys and that's a massively topical subject that needs a better movie than this to do it justice. And then not as a sitcom.

To be fair, Cage and Jackson do pretty well here. Cage is laid back and a little wild. Jackson is far more uptight. Both are sympathetic and both grow during the film. Amos, as dumb an example of white trash as he is, proves to be a better human being than the rich white folk. Andrew, as out of touch with his own race as he is, changes with the trying experiences he's thrust into here.

And, for the most part, as good as Dourif is, and Coleman and Giancarlo Esposito as a black preacher who leads a protest march, we never stop watching Cage and Jackson. Everything of substance in the film comes out of the pair of them interacting and they're both easily up to the challenge.

And while that seems like a given now, it's fair to say that it probably wasn't in 1993. This was film #20 for Cage and #25 for Jackson, but the former hadn't yet found his niche and the latter hadn't yet become a star. In many ways, they were skilful leading men stuck playing a pair of character roles because the movies had not yet acknowledged who they are.

But hey, I liked the deviant sex toy cabinet, the smitten pizza delivery girl and the hostage negotiator who can't stop talking. I even liked the bloodhounds. But I'm not going to say that I liked the film. I'll just say that it could have been a heck of a lot worse.

NICOLAS CAGE
DENNIS HOPPER
LARA FLYNN BOYLE
RED ROCK WEST
WHERE ALL ROADS LEAD TO INTRIGUE
AND NOTHING IS WHAT IT SEEMS
POLYGRAM FILMED ENTERTAINMENT PRESENTS A PROPAGANDA FILMS PRODUCTION A FILM BY JOHN DAHL
NICOLAS CAGE DENNIS HOPPER "RED ROCK WEST" LARA FLYNN BOYLE TIMOTHY CARHART AND J.T. WALSH AS WAYNE
MUSIC BY WILLIAM OLVIS PRODUCTION DESIGNER ROB PEARSON EDITED BY SCOTT CHESTNUT
ASSOCIATE PRODUCERS RICK DAHL AND LYNN WEIMER EXECUTIVE IN CHARGE OF PRODUCTION TIM CLAWSON DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY MARC RESHOVSKY SUPERVISING PRODUCER ARON WARNER EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS MICHAEL KUHN AND JANIE McCANN
PolyGram FILMED ENTERTAINMENT
WRITTEN BY JOHN DAHL AND RICK DAHL PRODUCED BY SIGURJON SIGHVATSSON AND STEVE GOLIN DIRECTED BY JOHN DAHL
ASTRAL ASTRAL FILMS

RED ROCK WEST (1993)

DIRECTOR: JOHN DAHL

WRITERS: JOHN AND RICK DAHL

STARS: NICOLAS CAGE, DENNIS HOPPER,
LARA FLYNN BOYLE, TIMOTHY CARHART, DAN SHOR AND J. T. WALSH

Here's a movie that surprised me. I can see why it didn't succeed in the marketplace, as it plays very much like a film festival film, as one producer apparently suggested it should be, a suggestion the studio completely ignored and sold to cable instead.

It's an odd mix of genres, unfolding rather like a cross between a western and a neo-noir, with Cage as a drifter called Michael Williams who keeps trying but keeps failing to leave the town of Red Rock, which is somewhere twelve hundred miles from Odessa, Texas. It was shot here in Arizona, in Willcox, Sonoita and Elgin, but it's meant to represent Montana, I think.

It doesn't really matter, because it's a sort of *Twilight Zone* town, one that will take anyone in just like that but not spit you back out again until the story is done with you. And it takes a while for this story to be done with Cage.

He's in the vicinity for a job, but he doesn't get it because of a gammy leg, so asks the gas station owner, who he conspicuously chooses not to rob, where else he could try and he tells him Red Rock.

So he wanders into Wayne's Place, where he is immediately mistaken for Lyle from Dallas, a hitman Wayne hired to kill his wife, Suzanne. The irony is that the cops will just pin it on a drifter—you know, like Williams—but it pays $5,000 up front with $5,000 more when the job is complete.

Of course, this honest drifter isn't a killer, so initially he locates Suzanne and tells her what he was hired to do. She promptly hires him at double the rate to kill Wayne instead. And so Williams sends a letter to the sheriff to let him in on what's going on and then leaves town with the cash he's been given thus far. Bright man, right?

Except this is the Twilight Zone and he can't just leave. There's a storm raging and he hits someone, knocking him right over his car. He does the decent thing, of course, rushing this guy to hospital and even filling the paperwork out before he tries to sneak back out of there.

But—because you knew there had to be one of those coming—there are a bunch of twists showing up. The man he hit is the man whom Suzanne has been sleeping with. He wasn't in bad shape because Williams hit him with his car; he's in bad shape because he's been shot twice in the stomach, meaning that the cops are very interested. And, get this, the sheriff is Wayne. Uhoh! And the web only gets more tangled from there.

Cage is on top form here, in a film that fits the outsider template that he'd been mining so well in some of his best performances, such as *Raising Arizona* and *Wild at Heart*. Williams is an everyman but an honest one who is caught up in events far beyond his control. That was new at this stage of Cage's career.

Excellent character actor J. T. Walsh is good as Wayne, almost the opposite of Williams. He is emphatically a bad man and he started this house of cards toppling, but he doesn't have a semblance of control over events either.

These two are the grounding for the movie, because they refuse to overplay their parts, in scenes that are fleshed out by a succession of scene-stealing characters who ought to simply take over but somehow never quite do.

Chief among those are Lara Flynn Boyle as Suzanne, the utterly blatant femme fatale of the piece, who we know without a shadow of a doubt is trouble from the first moment we set eyes on her, and the always reliable Dennis Hopper as the real Lyle from Dallas. He shows up late and, in another of the countless ironic twists on display here, rescues Williams on the road out of town, promptly drives him right back in again and insists on buying a fellow veteran a drink at Wayne's Place.

Those twists keep on coming, the script the big winner here. It was written by the director of the film, John Dahl, with his brother Rick. He's known for neo-noir, this coming after his debut with the Val Kilmer movie *Kill Me Again* but before his big hit, *The Last Seduction*. Since those, he's moved into other genres and I like what I've seen. I should see more.

This is an unusual neo-noir and I'm wary of explaining why. Let's just say that I adored the ending, which makes total sense and contains no real surprises, but unfolds in a way that I'm pretty sure most writers and directors would not have taken.

The real surprise, of course, is in how good this film is that eluded most people and never really found an audience except for film critics appreciative of genre-hopping originality. It's fair to say that the major films Cage appeared in during his First Thirty aren't all good and it seems just as fair to say that those films that are good aren't all good because of him.

I wasn't expecting much from this film, but it's the first in quite a few to succeed on every level: as a movie, as a story, as a performance by Nicolas Cage, the works. I liked *Honeymoon in Vegas* but it's hardly a movie with substance. *Vampire's Kiss*, *Never on Tuesday* and *Time to Kill* are more interesting than good. *Fire Birds* and *Zandalee* are consistent failures, while *Amos & Andrew* is an ill-advised consistent failure.

So I expected this one to follow suit, but it's the best film Cage had made since *Moonstruck* and the best for him since *Raising Arizona*. It's a shame it didn't get widely seen on the festival circuit, where it would have fit and where it could have built buzz before a wider release. It played TIFF in Toronto, which prompted some screenings but the studio had sold it to cable where it got seen a few times on HBO and then quickly lost in the rear view mirror.

I'd call it an important film for him at a time when he was reinventing his screen persona as a nice guy. Not a hero, like in *Fire Birds*; that sort of role was much better suited to others, but a nice guy the audience can relate to who's caught up in events. I liked him in *Honeymoon in Vegas* and wanted him to win the day. I liked him in *Amos & Andrew* and wanted the happy ending he didn't necessarily deserve.

And I liked him here in a film where I didn't like a lot of characters. While it seems as if he ought to fit in the neo-noir town of Red Rock, he doesn't fit at all, because Michael Williams has no intention of being in a neo-noir. He doesn't want to be dragged down to the town's level and that takes balls.

YOU WON'T KNOW WHO TO TRUST...
WHAT TO BELIEVE...OR WHERE TO TURN.
MICHAEL BIEHN
SARAH TRIGGER
WITH NICOLAS CAGE
AND JAMES COBURN
DEADFALL
...THE ULTIMATE CON.
TRIMARK PICTURES AND TED FOX PRESENT A TED FOX PRODUCTION A CHRISTOPHER COPPOLA FILM
MICHAEL BIEHN SARAH TRIGGER WITH NICOLAS CAGE JAMES COBURN PETER FONDA CHARLIE SHEEN TALIA SHIRE
DEADFALL LINE PRODUCER ROBERT ENGELMAN MUSIC BY JIM FOX CO-PRODUCER CHRISTOPHER COPPOLA EXECUTIVE IN CHARGE OF PRODUCTION DAVID TRIPET
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS GERTRUDE FOX GERSON FOX MARK AMIN WRITTEN BY CHRISTOPHER COPPOLA & NICK VALLELONGA
PRODUCED BY TED FOX DIRECTED BY CHRISTOPHER COPPOLA
TRIMARK
R
ULTRA-STEREO
VIDMARK ENTERTAINMENT
1993 THEATRICAL RELEASE

DEADFALL (1993)

DIRECTOR: CHRISTOPHER COPPOLA

WRITER: CHRISTOPHER COPPOLA AND NICK VALLELONGA

STARS: MICHAEL BIEHN, SARAH TRIGGER, NICOLAS CAGE, JAMES COBURN, PETER FONDA, CHARLIE SHEEN AND TALIA SHIRE

Oh dear. Oh deary dear. From *Red Rock West*, an underseen gem of a film noir that you owe it to yourself to seek out and devour, Nicolas Cage then acted for his brother, Christopher Coppola, in an attempt at a film noir that falls as flat as a pancake. It's outrageously bad and, of all the countless bad things about it, Cage somehow manages to be easily the worst.

Because there is no god, he ended up acting in a prequel/sequel focused specifically on his character, but that was in 2017 when he had to take every role anyone would pay him to take. This was 1993 and he had no excuse.

It's a Michael Biehn movie, made the same year he made *Tombstone*, and he's described it to *Ain't It Cool News* as one of the five worst films that he's appeared in. It's so bad that "I always have this mental Freudian block and I can never remember the name of it." I'd say he's lucky. The only reason to see this is to see just how off the rails Cage gets. It was all him too. Biehn pointed out, "That was Nic Cage undirected, because his brother directed him and I think he just said 'Nic, do whatever you want.'" I can totally believe that suggestion.

It's not a good film even before Cage shows up, but it still has promise early on. Biehn is a conman called Joe Donan, who works for his dad, Mike, one of two roles for James Coburn. They stage a sting and successfully get away with a whole lot of drugs, but there's a catch. Mike's to be shot by Joe, who's using blanks for safety. Except Mike's dead. Somehow, Joe's gun suddenly contains real bullets. So, after a funeral, he heads out of town, with the vague mission Mike left him with his dying words in mind. He needs to go to Uncle Lou and get the cake from him.

Now, Joe didn't know he had an Uncle Lou, though he's entirely believable, given that he's played by James Coburn too, and he hasn't any idea what the cake is (neither do we), but he settles into a new life in a new crew because Lou is a conman as well and Joe seems capable.

So far, so good. Well, not really. Everything feels off. The sets feel empty, as if we're seeing empty sets with things in them rather than locations. It also feels like it really wants to be a comedy but it doesn't want to be funny. So there's a kind of lightheartedness that feels a long way out of place in a neo-noir in which everyone's a crook or a conman.

And then there's Cage. He plays Eddie, who is Uncle Lou's right hand man, except that he's completely unstable and immediately jealous that Joe is suddenly there and family. Frankly, he's a cheap con who thinks he's a lot better than he is, and the best moments in the movie are when Joe shows him up as the fool he is.

For instance, Uncle Lou lets Eddie give Joe a serious test. That's Baby, a huge black dude at a strip club where the dominatrix stripper is a

true vision. Baby owes Lou money and Eddie's been unable to get him to pay up for months. So Eddie takes him there, shows him Baby and walks back out to wait for the new fish to get beaten to a pulp. Instead, Joe aces the test and doesn't even break a sweat and that just pisses off Eddie even more.

There are good moments. But not many and there are a lot of bad moments, not only those featuring Cage. Everything about him is awful. He has a bad wig, dark glasses and a fake nose, albeit not quite as outrageous as the one that he wore in *Never on Tuesday*. He sports a loud Hawaiian shirt under a dull jacket.

He also has a bizarre accent but it's one that constantly changes. Initially, it seems like he's attempting to mumble like Marlon Brando as Don Corleone, which does at least make sense to a mad conman with delusions of grandeur. Then he seems to be simply asthmatic and not just due to him huffing rush like he's a sixteen year old adolescent.

He also throws tantrums, which become the other defining aspect to his character, which means that he ends up like six year old Fred from *Fred the Movie* pretending to be Inspector Clouseau, who's pretending to be a gangster. It isn't anything that anyone should ever choose to do on film. I kind of dug *Vampire's Kiss* as an oddly surrealistic statement and I think *Never on Tuesday* had quite a charm to it. This is just embarrassing to all involved.

At least he's not boring. He's everything else at once but he's never boring. The film, while it's trying to figure out if it wants to be funny or not, does suddenly become boring. Even a sex scene with Biehn and leading lady Sarah Trigger is boring and both of them are damn good looking actors. Nobody knows who they want to be, whether they're on screen or off and that just leads us to put a list together of the worst things about the movie.

Cage is easily the worst, even if he isn't at all boring, with the out of place score by Jim Fox next and then Gigi Rice as bubblehead bimbo Blanche. We could all conjure up a few dozen items for this list and then debate the virtues of each to rank them accordingly.

But what's the best thing about the picture? That's a much tougher question. That stripper who has absolutely nothing to do except wear a cool leather outfit that bares her breasts and dance suggestively on a stage? She might well be the best thing about the movie and she has nothing to do with it.

OK, James Coburn's as good as we expect as identical twins, and I learned that he actually was a twin in real life. Charlie Sheen does a good job of playing Leonardo DiCaprio in *The Great Gatsby*, even though that didn't happen for another twenty years. He's a very good and very polite billiards player. Angus Scrimm is a blast as always, even if he seems to believe he was cast in a horror flick as a mad doctor with an evil prosthetic arm. They're all fun, even if we wonder what films they waltzed in from.

But the best thing about this movie for me was when Joe rips off Eddie's bad wig to stick his head in a deep fat fryer. The visual effects are superb and the whole scene is catharsis on a stick. It firmly draws a line in the sand after which Cage will stop his shenanigans and the film can start to recover.

Spoiler: it never does.

SHIRLEY MacLAINE NICOLAS CAGE
SHE'S A FORMER FIRST LADY.
HE'S A TOP AGENT IN THE SECRET SERVICE.
STUCK IN THE WORST ASSIGNMENT OF ALL.
GUARDING TESS
A COMEDY BEYOND THE CALL OF DUTY

GUARDING TESS (1994)

DIRECTOR: HUGH WILSON

WRITERS: HUGH WILSON AND P. J. TOROKVEI

STARS: NICOLAS CAGE, SHIRLEY MACLAINE,
AUSTIN PENDLETON, EDWARD ALBERT, JAMES REBHORN AND RICHARD GRIFFITHS

Deadfall taught me once again, not that I was in need of a reminder, that unrestrained Cage is wildly inconsistent and often acutely painful but *Guarding Tess* taught me once again that a Cage bristling against massive restraints that a plot imposes upon him is often impressive.

He's Douglas Chesnic, a secret service agent but *Guarding Tess* is far from an action flick. It's a light character-driven drama—except for the third act, when it forgets what it was doing to ratchet up the tension in what could be a CBS primetime show—with the two lead characters a new take on the odd couple.

That's because the other one is Tess Carlisle, widow of a dead president, and she's played by Shirley MacLaine. He's done a professional job to protect her over the past three years, a job that he's hated with a passion, and now plans to return to Washington to move into a more active duty. She's not at all ready to let him go, which means that he's sent right back again, because she has the current president, the VP under her husband, wrapped around her little finger. His periodic politely angry phone calls to Chesnic are the best thing about the movie.

Initially, the results are awkward, because it couldn't be any other way. We expect to be on Chesnic's side because he's doing his very best in the line of duty but we also expect to be on Tess's side, because she was FLOTUS and she's played by Shirley MacLaine, who we'd root for if she was playing Satan incarnate.

However, she's hardly sympathetic here, as she keeps nagging at his composure, treating him like a servant and imposing odd rules on the household, like never bringing a gun into her bedroom. His response to being returned for a fresh tour of duty is to do everything in accordance with the book out of a petty sense of spite, not that he wasn't close to being that anal through sheer professionality but it is a deliberate shift. Thus we expect to be on both sides but actually turn out to be on neither.

But, as they gradually find ways to get along with each other, for no better reason than it's what odd couples always do in movies about odd couples, they both start to mellow just a little and, in so doing, start to grow on us too.

The first act is decent but frustrating, as we wade through the budding power struggle. He refuses to let her chauffeur drive off until she sits on the other side of the car. She pouts and there's a standoff. It's childish but we kind of get the point of both sides and sit through all these minor power plays.

Sometimes they're funny, like when she has that same chauffeur drive off while the car is being filled up at a gas station, leaving all the agents floundering around in her dust.

Sometimes they're poignant, like when she goes to the opera in Columbus, but falls asleep in her box and Chesnic realises the audience

are realising and taking surreptitious photos. If he sticks to the book, it isn't his job to make her look good, but he's a decent human being and he doesn't want her to look bad in public, even if she drives him nuts, so he gently tries to jar her awake.

Of course, both these incidents become far more than funny or poignant, as they run on, but they're strong moments that point out the way forward and they're enough to keep us on board as we wait for the mellowing.

I liked Cage here, because he's held firmly in check on two levels. On the first, his character is held firmly in check by the authority figures that he works for, and, on the second, he as an actor is held firmly in check by his director.

That must have felt rather unusual for Hugh Wilson, who co-wrote and directed, as he was far more used to madcap stories, not least two dominant titles in his filmography: the initial *Police Academy* movie, which he also co-wrote and directed, and *WKRP in Cincinatti*, a TV show he created, wrote, produced and directed. This is notably restrained in comparison, though it must have had an impact on him because one later hit for him was *The First Wives Club*.

Beyond Cage being better when, well, caged, I'm coming to enjoy him most either as a good man or a fool with good intentions. This time out, he's clearly the former but with a hint of the latter, so it's a win all around. Chesnic is a perfect role for him, even if he probably had a deep and abiding wish to add a prosthetic nose and a stupid accent.

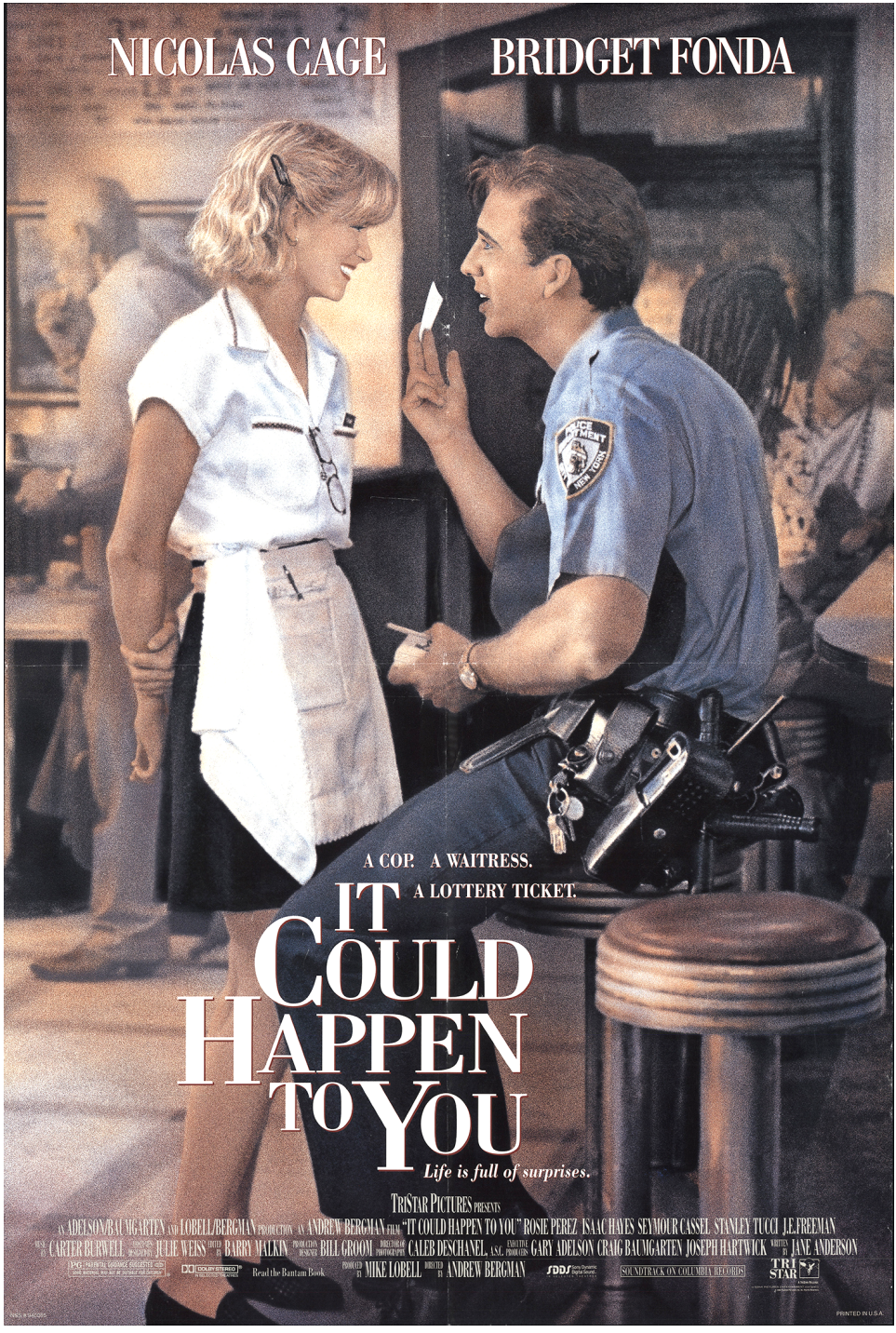
Shirley MacLaine is good too, because Tess is a lonely old lady who misses the busy times in the spotlight but has too much decorum to actually address that with anyone. She finds a way, as a talented actress like her ought to do, to endow her character with a lot more depth than was there to begin with.

Propping up the two leads by providing the perfect amalgam of characterful support and keeping the hell out of the way are a string of reliable actors that we all know from a slew of other roles, even if we don't always remember their names. There's Richard Griffiths from *Pie in the Sky* and *Harry Potter*; David Graf from the *Police Academy* movies; Austin Pendleton from *A Beautiful Mind*; John Roselius from the *This is Your Brain on Drugs* PSA; James Rebhorn from *Independence Day*; even Harry Lennix from *The Blacklist*. They're all excellent.

But this lives or dies on its script, and it has a habit of forgetting what it's doing. It works best as a light comedy with underlying drama, which means that it's decent during the first act and better during the second, but then, for some reason, it gets all serious on us during the third, as if it suddenly decided it wanted to be a TV movie, a thriller of the week. I wasn't sold on that shift in the slightest. It's done OK, I guess, but it really had no need to go there.

I'd have been happier if it had continued its steady movement from antagonism to mutual respect to something closer to friendship and, while that does underpin even the third act, it isn't given the subtle focus it deserved. And so this is a decent but mostly forgettable picture that should have been a level above that.

From Cage's perspective, it's another solid step into the nice guy role after *Honeymoon in Vegas* and, in its way, *Red Rock West*, to prepare for the quintessential nice guy role in *It Could Happen to You*, which I'm now looking forward to even more than I was already.


NICOLAS CAGE
BRIDGET FONDA
A COP. A WAITRESS.
A LOTTERY TICKET.
IT COULD HAPPEN TO YOU
Life is full of surprises.
TRISTAR PICTURES PRESENTS
AN ADELSON/BAUMGARTEN AND LOBELL/BERGMAN PRODUCTION AN ANDREW BERGMAN FILM "IT COULD HAPPEN TO YOU" ROSIE PEREZ ISAAC HAYES SEYMOUR CASSEL STANLEY TUCCI J.E. FREEMAN
WRITTEN BY CARTER BURWELL DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY JULIE WEISS EDITED BY BARRY MALKIN PRODUCTION DESIGNER BILL GROOM DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY CALEB DESCHANEL A.S.C. EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS GARY ADELSON CRAIG BAUMGARTEN JOSEPH HARTWICK WRITTEN BY JANE ANDERSON
PG PARENTAL GUIDANCE SUGGESTED
DOLBY STEREO
Read the Bantam Book
PRODUCED BY MIKE LOBELL DIRECTED BY ANDREW BERGMAN
SDDS
SOUNDTRACK ON COLUMBIA RECORDS
TRI STAR
PRINTED IN U.S.A.

IT COULD HAPPEN TO YOU (1994)

DIRECTOR: ANDREW BERGMAN

WRITER: JANE ANDERSON

STARS: NICOLAS CAGE, BRIDGET FONDA, ROSIE PEREZ, WENDELL PIERCE, ISAAC HAYES, SEYMOUR CASSEL, STANLEY TUCCI, RICHARD JENKINS AND RED BUTTONS

Let's point out up front that this isn't close to my kind of movie. I'm not a fan of romcoms and I'm not a fan of feelgood movies. Had I not seen any of Cage's First Thirty before starting this runthrough, I might expect to be drawn to a thriller like *Face/Off*, a neo-noir like *Red Rock West* and a no budget indie comedy like *Never on Tuesday*. I wouldn't expect to like this.

But I did. I had a blast with it, even though I could write the entire script in my head from the poster and the synopsis. There isn't really a surprising moment to be found, even though writer Jane Anderson tries a little to find one, but that doesn't matter. The sentimentality is on the nose throughout and the leads are as inherently likeable as they could be. It simply works, even on viewers who don't expect to be worked on by feelgood romcoms.

We're introduced to Cage's character, a cop called Charlie Lang, by Isaac Hayes, narrating like he's a one man Greek chorus called Angel. Charlie's a good cop and I mean a saintly cop. He helps the neighbourhood kids with baseball swings. He delivers a baby on a bus. And when he sees a blind man halfway across a street, he carries him the rest of the way. He's literally New York's finest.

The only catches are that he's poor and he's married to Rosie Perez who doesn't want to be poor. She's Muriel and she presses him to buy a lottery ticket because the state prize is up to $64m. He even waits in line for it, annoying his partner Bo, who wants Burger King. And that's why they try the Ideal Coffee Shop over the road instead, where their waitress, Yvonne, is Bridget Fonda.

They're called to an incident pretty quickly, so they only have time for coffee and Charlie settles the bill. He has cash for the drinks but nothing left for a tip, so he promises that he'll return with one tomorrow. If his ticket wins, he'll give her half the prize; if it doesn't, he'll double the usual tip.

The reason we have a movie is that he wins. And he wins big: a $4m cut of the jackpot. The "Honey, I've got something to tell you" scene is priceless. It could easily be summed up by a pair of lines—"I gave her my word!" "Do you love me?"—but it's better that that. The scene where he tells Yvonne, whom he's never met before the previous day, is even better.

And so we're off and running. I should point out here that this was inspired by a true story, but it isn't that true story. Robert Cunningham and Phyllis Penzo knew each other before they split a lottery ticket and they each picked half of the numbers. That was a decade earlier and both continued to be married to their spouses. Cunningham stayed on the force. Penzo spent three more years as a waitress before retiring early. None of the drama in this film happened to them. And there's lots of drama in this film.

This was Jane Anderson's debut feature as a writer, though she'd written some TV episodes and a TV movie, *The Positively True Adventures of the Alleged Texas Cheerleader-Murdering Mom*, so she wrote it right out of the feelgood movie textbook with a quintessential romance that a naïve teenager could see blossoming and most of the supporting characters certainly do, but the leads don't. That's one of the main reasons why this works so well.

Charlie clearly shouldn't have ever married Muriel because they don't have a single thing in common. Money was always going to break them up. After the payout, Muriel goes on the shopping spree she's always wanted, starting with a mink coat. Yvonne splurges on a jar of macadamia nuts.

And Yvonne clearly shouldn't have married Eddie Biasi, in the form of Stanley Tucci. He's a slimeball who ran up her credit card and ran for the hills, meaning that we first meet her in bankruptcy court instead of the coffee shop.

Charlie and Yvonne don't hit it off that first day, because she's still reeling from the judge's verdict, but they're two peas in a pod and it's a true joy watching them find in friendship the enjoyment neither found in marriage.

It's not all quirkiness either, like when they show up at the subway with a bucket of coins to pay everyone's way home for the night. It's often serious, like when Yvonne buys Ideal to turn into Yvonne's and establishes a table for anyone who can't afford a meal, with Charlie's name on it.

I won't spoil this, not that the synopsis isn't enough for you to see where every plot thread is going to end up, but I will sum it up with the scene when Charlie catches up to his wife on a Millionaires Club river cruise.

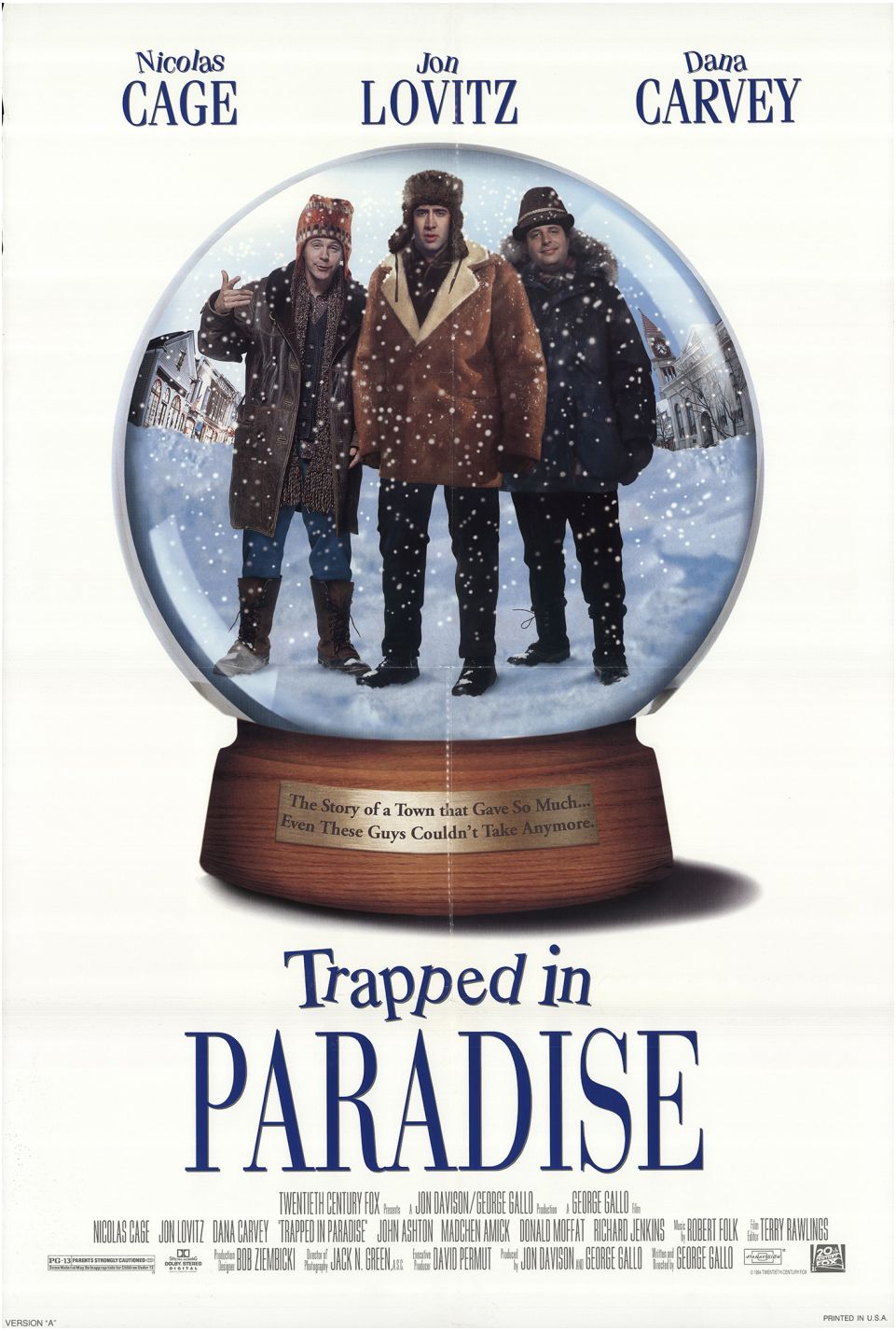
Charlie got off, saw Yvonne, helped her deal with her cab driver, missed the boat, so they went to dinner together, chatted, danced and connected. When he gets back on the boat, after a substantial passage of time, Muriel's still lost in the sleazy financial advice of Jack Gross. Charlie's actually rehearsed his speech to explain where he's been but never delivers it because he realises that she doesn't realise he wasn't there all along. "We're like different channels," he tells Yvonne. "I'm on CNN. She's the Home Shopping Network."

Cage is the nicest guy who ever lived in this movie. He tried all sorts of roles before finding his nice guy routine in *Honeymoon in Vegas*, a movie directed by this film's director, Andrew Bergman, and I enjoyed what he did there. He varied it a little in *Amos & Andrew*, *Red Rock West* and *Guarding Tess*, before utterly outdoing their niceness here. I have to say that I didn't expect this. I knew he had a fondness for going batshit insane and, through this project, I've learned it was because of his appreciation for surreality. Did anyone expect that he would be such a great screen nice guy? I doubt it, but he is, even if the gonzo Cage probably hates that.

He's only matched in niceness by Yvonne, as Bridget Fonda has exactly the same approach, though it wasn't quite as unusual for her, *Point of No Return* notwithstanding. Both do it with effortless charm, which takes them through a wild ride of circumstances, none of which I'm going to talk about here because you deserve to take that ride with them, every schmaltzy feelgood curve of the way.

There's a better film in this story, one that isn't so ruthlessly predictable, but it would be a tough job indeed to find better leads. In fact, it would be so tough that nobody should try.

Now, I guess I should buy a lottery ticket. It apparently could happen to me.


Nicolas
CAGE
Jon
LOVITZ
Dana
CARVEY
The Story of a Town that Gave So Much...
Even These Guys Couldn't Take Anymore.
Trapped in
PARADISE
TWENTIETH CENTURY FOX Presents A JON DAVISON/GEORGE GALLO Production A GEORGE GALLO Film
NICOLAS CAGE JON LOVITZ DANA CARVEY "TRAPPED IN PARADISE" JOHN ASHTON MARGHEN AMICK DONALD MOFFAT RICHARD JENKINS Music by ROBERT FOLK Film Editor TERRY RAWLINGS
PG-13 PARENTS STRONGLY CAUTIONED
Production Designer BOB ZIEMBICKI Director of Photography JACK N. GREEN, A.S.C. Executive Producer DAVID PERMUT Produced by JON DAVISON and GEORGE GALLO Written and Directed by GEORGE GALLO
VERSION "A"
PRINTED IN U.S.A.

TRAPPED IN PARADISE (1994)

DIRECTOR: GEORGE GALLO

WRITER: GEORGE GALLO

STARS: NICOLAS CAGE, JON LOVITZ AND DANA CARVEY

I must say that I had reservations going into this film and they were reinforced by some of the early scenes, but it won me over in the end as a film not as stupid as it looks and with a lot more heart. No, it's not great. It's a goddamn Christmas movie, for Pete's sakes, but it's not as bad as *Birdy*, let alone *Zandalee* or *Deadfall*. It doesn't deserve the low ratings it has.

What's more, instead of a new stylistic shift, it turns out to be yet another example of Cage doing good work as a screen nice guy, not only one of the three thieves who try to rob a bank in Paradise, Pennsylvania, but also a romantic lead in a subtle romance with Mädchen Amick.

He's wondering if he's a nice guy as the film begins, because someone drops a wallet in the busy New York Christmas rush and it's kicked around until it ends up in his hands. He thinks obviously about doing the right thing instead of just taking the money. After all, the owner's photos show that he has kids, so it's probably cash for gifts. He tells a priest that he sent it back, but he lies to that priest about how long it's been since his last confession, so we can choose whether to believe him or not.

What we can be sure of is that he's Bill Firpo and he manages a restaurant in New York. Oh, and he has a pair of brothers, Dave and Alvin, who are being paroled early because the jails are overcrowded. And, get this, they're played by Jon Lovitz and Dana Carvey, which does not instil confidence. I like both of them and they have a lot of talent, but I didn't expect them to co-star in a comedy as Cage's brothers. One of these things is not like the others, right?

Well, that's exactly how it's set up. Lovitz is quite fun as Dave Firpo, talkative and unable, apparently congenitally, to ever tell the truth about anything. Carvey is far less fun as Alvin Firpo, kleptomaniac, not least because he puts on a stupid accent when Cage doesn't. He does much better with a stupid accent but it's still a stupid accent and it's annoying.

They're released into his custody and terms dictate that they can't leave state, so naturally they immediately want him to drive them to Pennsylvania, to partake in a quest of sorts on behalf of one of their fellow inmates, who has not seen his daughter in years. He won't do it, and they know he won't do it, so they have a scheme already in motion to narrow down his options and persuade him into it.

So, of course, they end up in Paradise, which is a sleepy small town where everyone is nice to the degree that we almost wonder whether we're in the Twilight Zone. Ditch the humour and we might as well be, because the film does acquire a heart and it's that sort of heart.

What else they discover in Paradise is that the bank's security is almost non-existent, not that Dave and Alvin were expecting anything different. The security guard is old and asleep. The camera isn't plugged in. The place is ripe for the picking. Oh hey, and an armoured car

promptly arrives to put $275,000 into the vault that beckons to the Firpos.

This is a stupid comedy, make no mistake, a stupid comedy with a plot that won't surprise you at all. However, there are clever bits here too and I laughed aloud more than once when I wasn't remotely expecting to. What's more, I couldn't help but draw comparisons that I had no expectation of making, to *Red Rock West*, a much better and more serious film, but with a common device in the inability of the lead to actually leave the central location.

In *Red Rock West*, Cage is unwittingly caught up in a film noir and every time he tries to get out of Red Rock and the mess there in which he's found himself, circumstances conspire to bring him right back in again. In *Trapped in Paradise*, exactly the same thing happens, just with film noir changed to caper comedy and Red Rock changed to Paradise. In many ways, this is *Red Rock West* but with idiots and a light hearted *Twilight Zone* message.

It's also a far more transparent film because George Gallo telegraphs everything and so we tend to know what's going to happen in the next scene before any of the characters do. It doesn't take a genius to notice that Bill Firpo kept the keys to the bank vault after they rob it. Why? To him, there's no good reason. To us, it tells us exactly where the plot's going to go. That's not great writing unless Gallo wants us to stay ahead of the game.

Fortunately Cage is on best behaviour here, leaving all the shenanigans to his two screen brothers, and he seems surprisingly happy as their straight guy. Maybe he enjoyed the way that Gallo brings subtle surreality into the mix as a way to tighten the net around the Firpos without anyone deliberately doing anything.

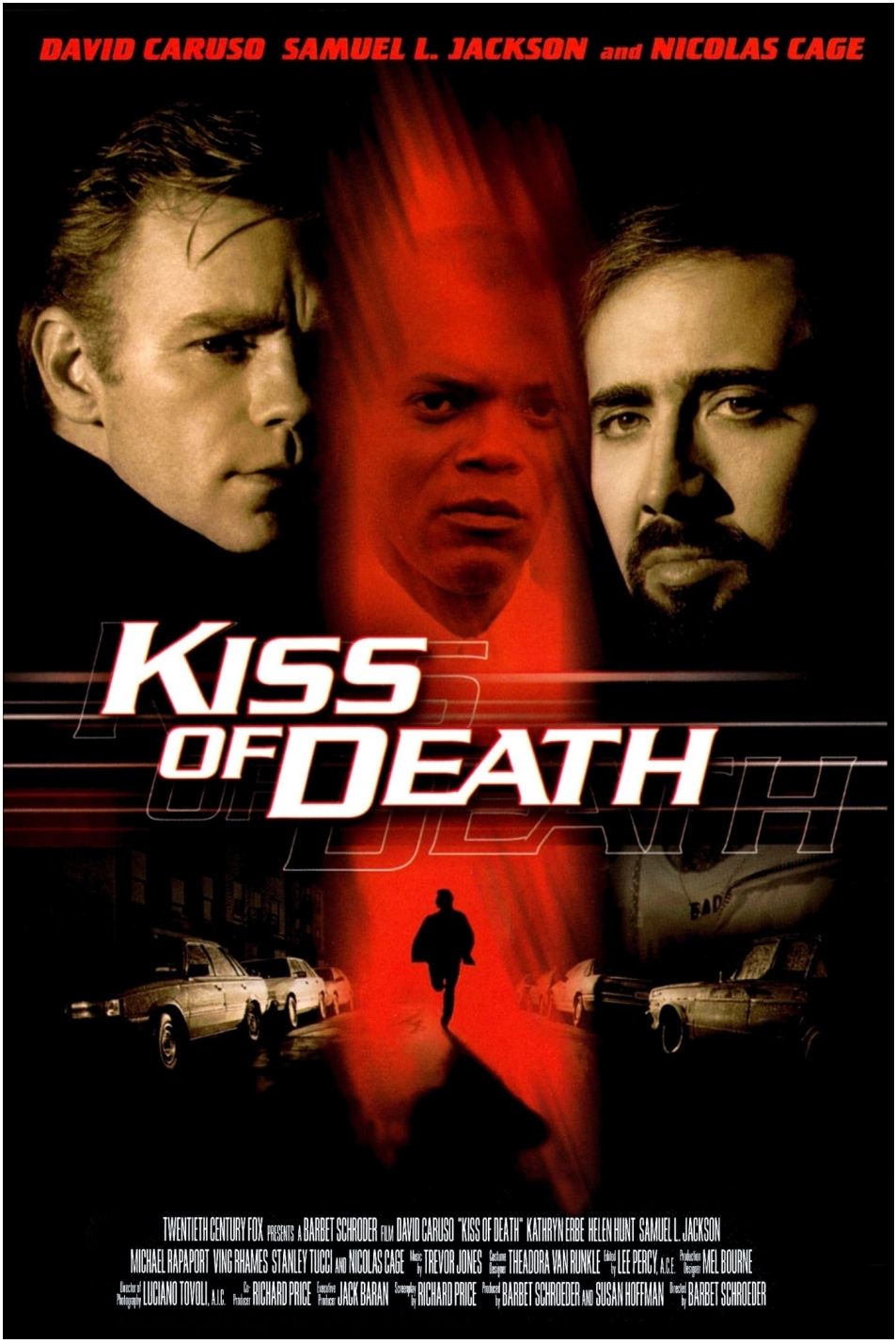
For instance, their first attempt to drive out of town, the proceeds of their heist stuffed in a bag, fails miserably because there's a blizzard raging and they drive off the road. They find themselves rescued by someone so nice that he leads them in Christmas carols as he drives them back into town, where he drops them at the bank manager's house. And Clifford, in an understated performance by Donald Moffat, is so nice that he gives them gifts from under his own tree, so they have something dry to wear, and sets extra places at the Christmas table. It all wears on Bill Firpo's conscience a treat.

Cage doesn't provide much of the humour. That's left most obviously to Lovitz and Carvey but, to my taste, most of the funniest scenes in the film are delivered by their screen mother, Ma Firpo. She's played by Florence Stanley, an old hand perhaps best known as Abe Vigoda's long suffering wife Bernice on *Barney Miller*. It has to be said that she delivers a different sort of humour to Lovitz and Carvey and I like it a heck of a lot more.

The funniest line isn't hers though. Clifford and his family have a three legged dog they've rescued, appropriately named Tripod, and one scene features him leaving the house last after a raid, with one FBI agent looking at another and saying, "We didn't do that, did we?"

Everything works out well, because it has to in Christmas movies and we never doubted it for a second. The various plot strands are tied together neatly in unsurprising fashion and it must be time to crack open the eggnog and see what's in those presents under the tree.

I liked this a lot more than I expected to and I liked Cage in it a lot more than I expected to. However, it is the epitome of fluff and it's not a film that's likely to stick long in the mind.


DAVID CARUSO SAMUEL L. JACKSON and NICOLAS CAGE
KISS OF DEATH
TWENTIETH CENTURY FOX PRESENTS A BARBET SCHROEDER FILM DAVID CARUSO "KISS OF DEATH" KATHRYN ERBE HELEN HUNT SAMUEL L. JACKSON
MICHAEL RAPAPORT VING RHAMES STANLEY TUCCI AND NICOLAS CAGE
Music by TREVOR JONES
Production Designer THEADORA VAN RUNKLE
Edited by LEE PERCY, A.C.E.
Production Designer MEL BOURNE
Director of Photography LUCIANO TOVOLI, A.I.C.
Co-Producer RICHARD PRICE
Executive Producer JACK BARAN
Screenplay by RICHARD PRICE
Produced by BARBET SCHROEDER AND SUSAN HOFFMAN
Directed by BARBET SCHROEDER

KISS OF DEATH (1995)

DIRECTOR: BARBET SCHROEDER

WRITERS: ELEAZAR LIPSKY, BASED ON THE 1947 SCREENPLAY BY BEN HECHT AND CHARLES LEDERER

STARS: DAVID CARUSO, KATHRYN ERBE, PHILIP BAKER HALL, ANTHONY HEALD, HELEN HUNT, SAMUEL L. JACKSON, MICHAEL RAPAPORT, VING RHAMES, STANLEY TUCCI AND NICOLAS CAGE

Taking a break from the nice guy roles that he took in each of his three 1994 films, Cage is back to being the bad guy: Little Junior Brown, an asthmathic psychopath who takes over his father's crime empire. As *Kiss of Death* is a loose remake of the 1947 movie with Victor Mature, he's not really playing Richard Widmark's role of Tommy Udo and therefore has an easy task bringing something memorably new to it.

Fortunately, Barbet Schroeder doesn't give him the leeway that Christopher Coppola gave him two years earlier in *Deadfall*, so he's good here, every potentially outrageous quirk very believable. His choice of beard reminds us of a bulked up John Travolta, but his inhaler gives him a little vulnerability, even if he happens to bench press strippers for fun.

The star of the picture is David Caruso, who was fresh from 26 episodes of *NYPD Blue* but a full seven years away from his signature role, sunglasses-wielding Horatio Caine. I've never been a fan of Caruso because everything that he does is a pose and that holds true here. He's initially tasked with acting opposite Michael Rapaport, but Rapaport brings Ronnie Gannon to life as a cheap thug, while Caruso poses his way through his scenes as Jimmy Kilmartin.

He's an ex-con trying to go clean and cousin Ronnie screws that up for him, bringing him onto a job driving a car transporter full of hot cars to the docks. The cops are there waiting and that's another stretch inside for Jimmy, whose wife Bev is in AA and whose daughter Corinna is a baby. Them's the breaks, dude.

What's important is that he doesn't snitch. He sits back and he does his time, at least until his idiot cousin roofies Bev, who wakes up at his place and, traumatised by what must have happened, drives into traffic. Ronnie even lies at the funeral, telling him that he did all he could for her. That's exactly when Jimmy calls the DA and offers names, setting up his cousin so that the boss thinks *he* ratted them out. And that's it for Ronnie, who Brown quickly kills.

I like Cage here. He's dressed all in white but he's no angel. He's not out of control as much as he does unusual things, often to extremes. When a customer grabs a girl at his strip club, he threatens him with physical harm but puts him up on the stage in his own underwear as a lesson instead. He runs the show, his equally asthmatic dad relatively out of the way. He's a commanding wild man, intense without ever going gonzo.

The biggest problem *Kiss of Death* has is that it's a bunch of different movies wrapped up in one script. It starts out as a regular crime flick, ditching the film noir style of the original. It's all about Jimmy trying to go clean but being dragged back into the life and, because David Caruso isn't quite as annoying as usual, it has the potential to play out well.

But dumbass Ronnie ends that movie with a lowlife move that sets his cousin against him and suddenly it's an undercover gig, Jimmy in Little Junior Brown's operation, wired for the DA so he can gather data on what Brown's got going with some dude called Omar, played by a tough Ving Rhames.

And then it's not about that either, because that mission goes south in bloody fashion and suddenly it's a jurisdictional dispute between agencies with Jimmy stuck in the middle and his daughter kidnapped to send a message and what movie were we watching again?

It's been a long time since I've seen the 1947 original but, while it moved through the same cycles, I don't remembering it being as jarring as this. What I liked this time was how the bad guy wasn't always constant. Sure, Cage always stays on that side of the fence, though we see less of his psychopathic side than we expect. At least he's honest about who he is. I loathed his laywer more, as well as the character who causes much of the trauma late in the film but I'll keep quiet about that because it's a spoiler.

The point is that Jimmy's set up to be a bad guy but isn't. He's spent time inside before the movie even begins and, while he wants to go clean to be with his wife and daughter, he's right back inside again at the drop of a hat. Both he and Bev are supposedly alcoholics, though that has no development whatsoever. And then he's a snitch. Add the fact that he's played by David Caruso and that's plenty of baggage to overcome. However Caruso plays him straight down the line and we end up with an ounce or two of sympathy for him as he gets caught up in the machinations of both sides, neither of which particularly care.

I liked Caruso more than I expected here but I wasn't with him the way the filmmakers had in mind. I liked Helen Hunt as his wife, who's dead before we know it. Stanley Tucci plays a sleazy DA, albeit not quite as loathsome as he was in *It Could Happen to You*. Michael Rapaport is a perfect lowlife. Ving Rhames does a good and reliable job as Omar.

Behind Caruso and Cage, though, is Samuel L. Jackson as a cop called Calvin Hart. He gets his teeth far more into this role than the one he was given in *Amos & Andrew* and easily the best story arc here is how Jimmy and Calvin change how they see each other over an hour and a half, with Cage hovering over them both like the Sword of Damocles.

It's not a bad film, though it's not up to the standards of the original. It's a decent watch, even with David Caruso in the lead. There are enough major talents backing him to get past his television style of acting, Jackson and Cage at the top of that list.

Had I come to this at random, it wouldn't be surprising. Cage as a quirky psychopath? Sure, that's exactly what I'd expect. However, at this point in his career, it feels oddly out of place. He'd arguably played a good guy in six out of his previous seven movies, even if he's an idiot thief in one, he's hired as a hitman in another and he robs a bank in a third.

This feels almost like an attempt to fix what he did in *Deadfall* only a couple of years earlier. This is established Cage, a much bigger name in 1995 than he was in, say, 1984, shooting up speakeasies in *The Cotton Club*, and he's saying that he can absolutely play a bad guy with substance, even if he's not the lead. He failed in *Deadfall*. He succeeded in *Kiss of Death* and could then move on to what would be some of the most important films of his career.

NICOLAS CAGE
ELISABETH SHUE
"A masterpiece... Nicolas Cage is extraordinary. Elisabeth Shue's performance is not just the best we will see this year, it is something to put beside the screen's best examples of vulnerable courage in a woman..."
-David Thomson, LOS ANGELES MAGAZINE
"Nicolas Cage has long been one of Hollywood's few truly original actors, and his audacity here is astounding. Elisabeth Shue's performance is a career-changing revelation. Sensual and tough, it announces her graduation from beaming ingenue to serious, full-blooded woman."
-John Powers,VOGUE
"Nicolas Cage is electrifying. Elisabeth Shue is astonishing.
Thanks to the artistry of Mike Figgis and his sterling players, this is one Vegas gamble that truly pays off."
-Guy Flatley, COSMOPOLITAN
LEAVING
LAS VEGAS
LUMIÈRE PICTURES PRESENTS A LILA CAZÈS PRODUCTION OF A MIKE FIGGIS FILM NICOLAS CAGE ELISABETH SHUE JULIAN SANDS "LEAVING LAS VEGAS"
MUSIC BY MIKE FIGGIS EDITED BY JOHN SMITH PRODUCTION DESIGNER WALDEMAR KALINOWSKI DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY DECLAN QUINN CO-PRODUCERS PAIGE SIMPSON AND STUART REGEN BASED UPON THE NOVEL BY JOHN O'BRIEN SCREENPLAY BY MIKE FIGGIS
R RESTRICTED
LUMIÈRE
PRODUCED BY LILA CAZÈS AND ANNIE STEWART DIRECTED BY MIKE FIGGIS
UNITED ARTISTS

LEAVING LAS VEGAS (1995)

DIRECTOR: MIKE FIGGIS

WRITER: MIKE FIGGIS, BASED ON THE NOVEL BY JOHN O'BRIEN

STARS: NICOLAS CAGE, ELIZABETH SHUE AND JULIEN SANDS

It's only been three years and six movies but Cage is back in Vegas. Things are different this time. He lost a girl in *Honeymoon in Vegas* and had to scramble to win her back. Here, he has nobody in the world when he arrives, with the plan of literally drinking himself to death, but he finds one anyway, in a hooker called Sera. I should quickly add that, whatever that sounds like, this is not a cutesy romcom.

Cage is Ben Sanderson and, between bottles, he's a Hollywood screenwriter. We don't know if he's good at it or not but he's very good at being drunk. He's lost his wife and he can't remember if she left because he drinks or if he drinks because she left. He's a complete wreck.

By the time he loses his job, fifteen minutes into the picture, the opening credits show up and we follow Ben to Vegas. At this point, we have no idea why he's a drunk and we don't learn anything else in the hour and a half still to come. He burned everything before leaving. There's nothing to tie him back to his former life and, if there is, then the drink will drown it all out.

From the very beginning, this is a peach of a performance from Cage. I'm hardly the biggest fan of the Academy Awards and know just how much politics goes into them, but he deserved his Oscar win. What makes this film so worthy is that it isn't just him delivering a stunner of a performance; Elizabeth Shue matches him. I can't say that I particularly enjoyed the movie, because it's really not an enjoyable film, but I thoroughly appreciated it.

It's a loose film, one that eschews plot for an odd character study. We know more about the futures of the two lead characters than we do their pasts, yet we find sympathy for both in a thoroughly honest present. We learn to know them surprisingly well, given that we have few facts to unleash about either.

That's clever writing and the script landed a nomination for Mike Figgis too, for his tough adaptation of the semi-autobiographical novel by John O'Brien. In accepting his Oscar, Cage thanked "the late John O'Brien, whose spirit moved me so much." That's because, while the story is fiction, Ben isn't light years away from John, who died by his own hand shortly after signing over the film rights to his book.

His end wasn't as romantic as Ben's. He was alone in his apartment in Beverly Hills with a shotgun for company. Yet, this film provided him with the platform he needed to be taken seriously as a writer. His sister was able to get some of his unpublished novels into print and *Leaving Las Vegas* ensures that he will be read.

My most obvious appreciations are for the two lead performances. Cage is outstanding as he walks a clever balance between believably out of control and his traditional over the top. In every one of his many gonzo performances, he's an actor. Here, he becomes a character, a crucial delineation. Shue is very different, the

life to his death. She's as crude as her chosen profession might suggest, but she's tender too and, while neither is each other's salvation, it is fair to say that they help each other a great deal during the four weeks Ben thinks he has.

His best scenes may be the ones in which he wakes up with the DTs and has to find a way to the fridge to get alcohol back into his system, in order to let him function as a human being again. Hers are the ones where she knows she can't save him but dearly wants to. One where she buys him a flask is a textbook in showing the combination of care and pain on her face.

However, I appreciated the filmmaking too. This plays very loose, with an impressionistic texture, shot on 16mm rather than 35mm and with lots of shots where the frame rate lowers in mimickry of a drunk man seeing the world in flashes. It's very much an art film that made the ever-elusive breakthrough to mainstream acceptance.

That said, I wonder how often its fans watch it. It reminds me of the British kitchen sink dramas that tend to leave me stunned by their power but with an abiding wish never to see them again. Whole scenes of dialogue are lost beneath the tasty soft jazz soundtrack, much of it sung by Sting. I guess it's meant to be just as impressionistic as the visuals.

There's also some serious talent here, often in blink and you'll miss 'em cameos. Cage and Shue are by far the most obvious characters, a majority of the film reserved for them. Julian Sands is third billed because he's Sera's crazy Latvian pimp Yuri. Everybody else is fleeting.

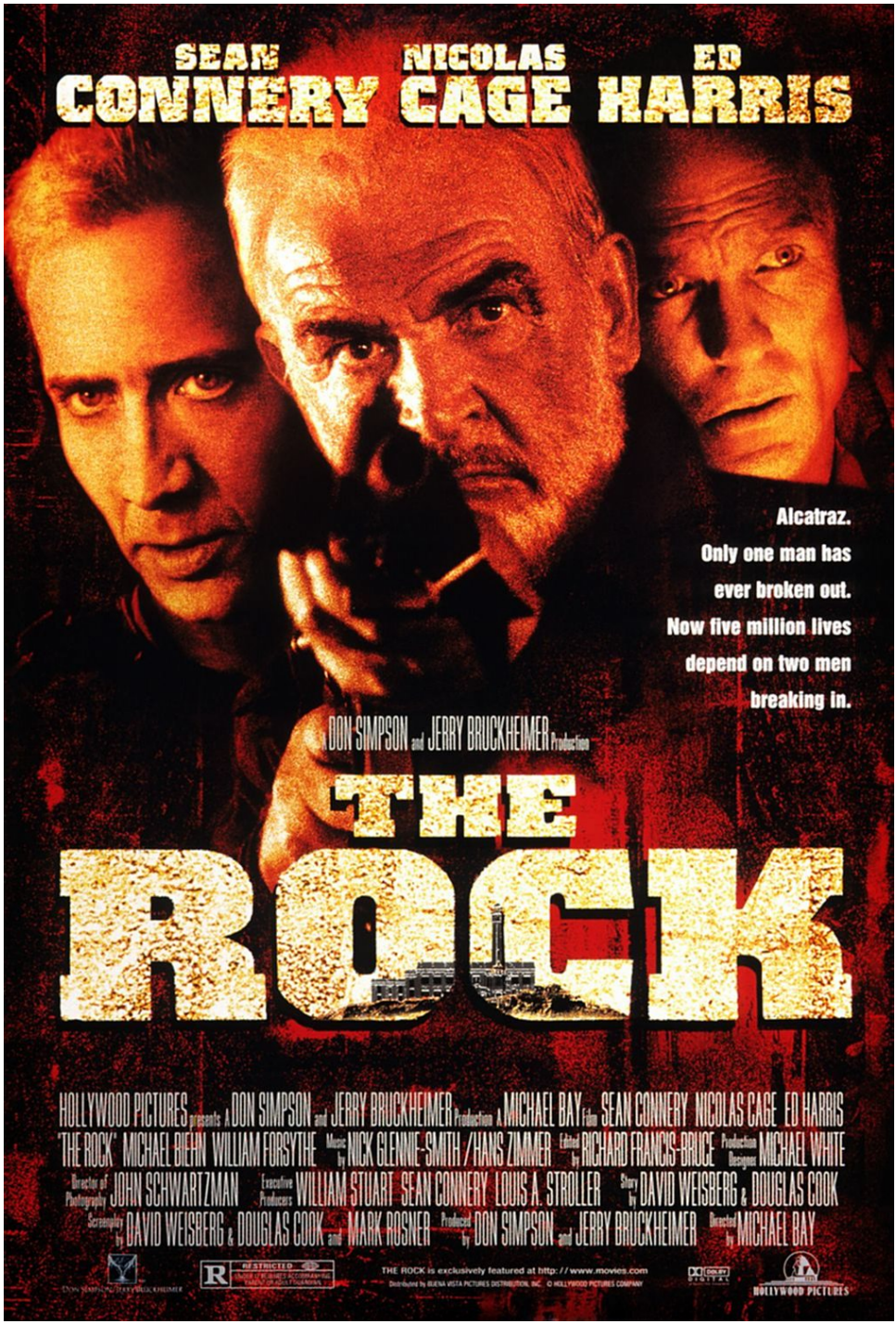
Far beneath them on the credits are French Stewart, as a businessman at a party that gets Sera as a present; Mike Figgis and Ed Lauter as gangsters aiming to take down Yuri; a bearded R. Lee Ermey as a conventioneer Sera fails to pick up; Julian Lennon as one of a succession of bartenders; Mariska Hargitay as a hooker at a crucial moment in the film; Bob Rafelson as a friendly face at a mall; even Xander Berkeley and Lou Rawls as cabbies. Shawnee Smith has a memorable scene as a biker chick too.

I thought I'd seen this before, but it didn't take much time for me to realise that I hadn't. It's a powerful film on a first viewing, but I do wonder how it'll play on a second. I can't say I was surprised by much that happened, even if it's rare to see a major film dive so deeply into substance abuse, especially alcohol, without a moral message or a happy ending.

What surprised me was how good both Cage and Shue are here. Nothing in this First Thirty prepared me for this performance. I've liked a lot of quirky roles and his good guy roles. The ones diving deepest into dark drama may be memorable but not always in good ways, such as *Vampire's Kiss*, *Time to Kill* and *Zandalee*. This is memorable and incredibly good.

I haven't seen as much of Shue's work, but I know her primarily for much lighter material, like *The Karate Kid*, *Adventures in Babysitting* and the *Back to the Future* sequels. I've seen tougher roles on TV, like *CSI* and *The Boys*, but this is a league above those. Everything she does here tasks her with showing two emotions at once and she nails them all.

The best scene for them both has to be their eventual sex scene, not that it's sexy or sultry or sensual. We see little of either actor and the pair of characters are wrecks at this point. It's just meaningful, both to the characters and to us, and it's that meaning that may well stay with me longest from the film.


SEAN CONNERY
NICOLAS CAGE
ED HARRIS
Alcatraz.
Only one man has ever broken out.
Now five million lives depend on two men breaking in.
DON SIMPSON and JERRY BRUCKHEIMER Production
THE ROCK
HOLLYWOOD PICTURES presents A DON SIMPSON and JERRY BRUCKHEIMER Production A MICHAEL BAY Film SEAN CONNERY NICOLAS CAGE ED HARRIS
"THE ROCK" MICHAEL BIEHN WILLIAM FORSYTHE Music by NICK GLENNIE-SMITH / HANS ZIMMER Edited by RICHARD FRANCIS-BRUCE Production Designer MICHAEL WHITE
Director of Photography JOHN SCHWARTZMAN Executive Producers WILLIAM STUART SEAN CONNERY LOUIS A. STROLLER Story by DAVID WEISBERG & DOUGLAS COOK
Screenplay by DAVID WEISBERG & DOUGLAS COOK and MARK ROSNER Produced by DON SIMPSON and JERRY BRUCKHEIMER Directed by MICHAEL BAY
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THE ROCK is exclusively featured at http://www.movies.com
HOLLYWOOD PICTURES

THE ROCK (1996)

DIRECTOR: MICHAEL BAY

WRITERS: DAVID WEISBERG AND DOUGLAS COOK, FROM A STORY BY DAVID WEISBERG

STARS: SEAN CONNERY, NICOLAS CAGE, ED HARRIS,
MICHAEL BIEHN, WILLIAM FORSYTHE, DAVID MORSE, JOHN SPENCER AND JOHN C. MCGINLEY

Here's another movie I've missed out on for a long time because I thought I'd seen it. That proved not to be the case and I don't think I've ever enjoyed a Michael Bay movie this much, not that it converts me into a fan. After all, the talent he had to work with here guarantees an interesting film at the very least.

And thank goodness for that because it's as overblown as we might expect even before we get past the opening credits. There are lots of uniforms and medals and a sweeping score by Hans Zimmer. If we didn't already know that this was a Michael Bay movie, we wouldn't be at all surprised when his name shows up.

It's raining through all of that and it's still raining as Brigadier General Francis Hummel and his men break into a naval depot, murder American soldiers and wander off with fifteen M55 rockets loaded with VX gas. We find out what that means when the sixteenth drops, a toxic ball bursts and the man who doesn't get out before they lock the doors melts horribly.

Ed Harris is spot on as Hummel, an excellent example of a villain who's the hero of his own story. He's pissed that he's worked numerous secret missions for the U.S. government and a whole slew of his men were left behind, their families not even compensated for their loss. And so, to highlight this in a way nobody can ignore, he takes over Alcatraz and points the rockets at San Francisco. $100m in forty hours or he'll start pressing the red button. And, as Dr. Stanley Goodspeed tells us, one rocket will kill sixty to seventy thousand people. "It's one of those things we wish we could disinvent."

In what might seem like a surprising casting choice to us today, the good doctor, who's the FBI's preeminent expert on chemical weapons, is played by Nicolas Cage. In the context of the time, it's not surprising at all as, regardless of his admirable condition, he wasn't yet known as an action star; in fact, the only time he had tried that, in *Fire Birds*, had backfired horribly. This opened him up to the potential of being the thinking man's action hero, a man of brain who could transition to brawn if needed. That worked well here and took him to *Con Air* and *Face/Off*, the last of his First Thirty.

We see a lot of him here, because for much of the first half of the film, he's clearly a lead character. Hummel's the bad guy. Goodspeed's the good guy. We learn that in his first scene of tension, dealing with a doll filled with sarin gas that his idiot assistant lets out. In case that wasn't enough, the doll is also equipped with a bomb, so he has to defuse it while his bunny suit gradually melts. He's a lot less cool when his girlfriend tells him she's pregnant.

Of course, as we know from the poster, Cage is not really the lead actor, because it's a Sean Connery movie, arguably his last decent action flick, even though he doesn't show up until 28

minutes in. So, is Cage a sidekick or the other half of a buddy cop movie? He's kind of both, but the dynamic between them is a good one that only gets better as the film runs on.

Goodspeed's a bit of a nerd. He really knows his stuff, but he also spends $600 on a Beatles album. He's an FBI agent but he doesn't tend to be deployed to the field. He's a decent shot but he's not used to carrying on duty. On the other hand, Connery's character, John Patrick Mason, was British SAS, meaning that he's the best of the best, even if he's spent the last few decades languishing in an American cell, sans trial, because he has dirt on everyone, even if they have no idea where he hid the microfilm.

Yes, that does mean that conspiracy theory nuts will dig this too. The final line of dialogue is, "You wanna know who killed JFK?" Mason does and he's not telling.

The reason that Mason's in the film is that Hummel chose his rockets well. The standard counter to this type of gas is to use napalm but that doesn't work on VX, so the military have to shift over to experimental thermite and it's not likely to be ready in time. That means that the only hope we have is Mason, the only man to have ever escaped from Alcatraz, and who can presumably therefore sneak himself back in, with Goodspeed as his expert and a team of SEALs led by a confident Michael Biehn.

It shouldn't surprise that it quickly ends up being just Mason and Goodspeed, so creating that buddy cop dynamic. Oh, and in case you might wonder why Mason doesn't just get the hell out of there, he has a daughter who lives in San Francisco, so it's in his best interests to ensure the mission succeeds. For absolutely no good reason, Goodspeed's girlfriend also flies in; he doesn't need any incentive, so it's just a little added pressure to perform.

The two actors do work very well together. Connery plays a tough character but he's also inherently calm, understandably confident in his abilities. Cage's character is clearly out of his depth, but also notably capable. He does a lot of two tone dialogue escalations, delivering half of a line and then doubling emphasis and volume for the second half. Both get plenty of opportunity to shine here and, quite frankly, their double act is the best thing on offer.

Behind them are the other character actors who do reliable work. Harris is excellent, but he's far from alone. David Morse, Tony Todd, William Forsythe, Michael Biehn... all deliver strong performances with showcase moments and they all help the film greatly.

Of course, the worst thing on offer is how it all gets wildly overblown, but Bay fans will see that as a positive. I have to admit I got a kick out of the outrageous car chase down the San Francisco hills, with Mason's Humvee crashing into everything possible to block the way for the pursuing cops and Goodspeed in a Ferrari. The rail scene in the tunnels under Alcatraz is more stupid, unless it's secretly the Temple of Doom. Zimmer plays up all these scenes.

This is what it is. Anyone who likes Michael Bay movies should love this particular one, as it features plenty of chases, explosions and all the elements they'll expect, but with far more substance than any of the *Transformers* films. I get intensely bored with their overkill but this didn't even drive me to distraction. I was with Cage and Biehn and Connery throughout, even when it turned into a videogame for no good reason. Where else did they get that obstacle with the fire and the wheels and the intricate timing?

So I guess I do like one Michael Bay film.

NICOLAS CAGE
JOHN CUSACK
JOHN MALKOVICH
THEY WERE DEADLY ON THE GROUND.
NOW THEY HAVE WINGS.
A JERRY BRUCKHEIMER PRODUCTION
CON AIR
TOUCHSTONE PICTURES PRESENTS
A JERRY BRUCKHEIMER PRODUCTION
NICOLAS CAGE JOHN CUSACK JOHN MALKOVICH
"CON AIR" STEVE BUSCEMI VING RHAMES COLM MEANEY
MYKELTI WILLIAMSON RACHEL TICOTIN MUSIC BY MARK MANCINA AND TREVOR RABIN FILM EDITORS CHRIS LEBENZON STEVE MIRKOVICH, A.C.E. GLEN SCANTLEBURY
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY DAVID TATTERSALL B.S.C. VISUAL EFFECTS BY DREAM QUEST IMAGES EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS CHAD OMAN JONATHAN HENSLEIGH PETER BOGART JIM KOUF LYNN BIGELOW
DOLBY DIGITAL SDDS www.con-air.com WRITTEN BY SCOTT ROSENBERG PRODUCED BY JERRY BRUCKHEIMER DIRECTED BY SIMON WEST
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Touchstone Pictures

CON AIR (1997)

DIRECTOR: SIMON WEST

WRITER: SCOTT ROSENBERG

STARS: NICOLAS CAGE, JOHN CUSACK, JOHN MALKOVICH,
STEVE BUSCEMI, VING RHAMES, COLM MEANEY, MYKELTI WILLIAMSON AND RACHEL TICOTIN

What I like the most about *Con Air*, a picture I should have seen many years ago but never got round to until now, is that Cage still isn't the action hero in the way we expect. It seems like every time he gets the opportunity to be a straight forward action hero, he resists.

In *The Rock* he was a kinda sorta action hero but he was also the nerdy dude playing second fiddle to tough guy Sean Connery. Here, he's a bona fide action hero at the very outset, but it doesn't last and he takes an utterly differently approach for the bulk of the film.

He's Cameron Poe and, to keep a trend alive from *The Rock*, his wife is pregnant. He's a U.S. Army Ranger, who looks great in uniform for his honourable discharge and return home to Tricia in Mobile, Alabama. And he doesn't get into the bar fight some idiot wants him to get into, which makes her happy because she was hoping the army would take that guy out of him. Apparently it did.

Except this idiot and his two drunk buddies decide to jump him in the parking lot, with a knife. He responds, totally in self defence, but he leaves one of them dead on the ground. The others skip with the knife, the judge calls his hands deadly weapons and suddenly he's in a cell serving seven to ten years. He watches his daughter grow up in photos, he learns Spanish and he exercises a heck of a lot.

Eight years later, he's paroled and climbs on board the *Jailbird*, a prison plane, to take him home. So far, so darkly realistic. Now we turn the Hollywood logic up to eleven.

Also on the *Jailbird* are his diabetic cellmate Mike O'Dell, known as Baby-O, and a collection of the worst of the worst, each one of them an impeccably nicknamed villain who's played by a very recognisable character actor. Because that's how things work in action cinema!

The face at the top of the poster belongs to John Malkovich, because he plays Cyrus "The Virus" Grissom, a jack of all trades criminal. The gentleman of colour facing down a plane with his twin guns is Ving Rhames, as Nathan "Diamond Dog" Jones, a black power terrorist. There's serial rapist John Baca, or Johnny 23, a count of his victims, in the memorable form of Danny Trejo. There's Dave Chappelle as a low level drug dealer, Joe "Pinball" Parker. Yes, I mean the comedian.

A little less recognisable are Nick Chinlund as William "Billy Bedlam" Bedford, who killed his ex-wife's entire family; M. C. Gainey as Earl "Swamp Thing" Williams; and Renoly Santiago as a transgender prisoner called Ramon "Sally Can't Dance" Martinez.

Oh, and best of all, even if Malkovich is very much in charge of the show, there's a legend of a serial killer, Garland Greene, the Marietta Mangler, who's played, with clear nods to Sir Anthony Hopkins's version of Hannibal Lector,

by Steve Buscemi. He's absolutely priceless in one of his best supporting performances and he steals every single scene he's in.

Anyway, with so much talent on the plane, it shouldn't surprise that Malkovich has quite the escape plan to orchestrate, starting with a takeover of the plane in mid-flight. There's an undercover DEA agent on board and a marshal too, in addition to various guards, but they're all rumbled quickly enough. And that leaves a single man to save the day: Cameron Poe, who starts out stopping Johnny 23 from raping the one female guard and builds from there.

Except the movie that's playing out in your head right now is not this one. That's *Die Hard*. One good guy with serious training happens to be in an isolated location with a whole bunch of bad guys ready to do bad things, so he goes about saving the day, right? Wrong.

Poe is a good guy, even with eight years of incarceration behind him, but he's really not interested in stopping the plane. He only has three tasks on his mind. Keep Sally Bishop safe from Johnny 23. Get some insulin for Baby-O. Go home to Tricia and see seven year old Casey for the first time. And so, for the longest time, this action thriller happens around him.

In that story, the hero is U.S. Marshal Vince Larkin, who isn't on the plane. He's in charge of monitoring the flight from the ground even if John Cusack seems a little young to play that character. He does it well and better as things progress, taking on a little action himself.

The bad guys are Malkovich and his crew of wildly dangerous freed prisoners, who notably don't include the Marietta Mangler, who has a story of his own to explore, now that he's free. Oh, and there's a very different bad guy, Agent Duncan Malloy, whom Colm Meaney plays as a fantastic bloodthirsty asshole. Larkin does his job and tries to solve the problem at hand, but Malloy just wants to blow it out of the sky. He almost does too, which makes what happens to his fancy car—licence plate AZZ KIKR—such glorious karma.

Once again, I find myself liking Cage here. It isn't a given, because I tend to appreciate the supporting character actors in stories like this, even if they're the bad guys, and I can't leave Buscemi's character alone. However, Cage has a fantastic story arc here, starting as a typical action hero but being quickly brought low and then, when the opportunity to turn into John McClane arises, he steadfastly resists until it's too late to do anything else. Eventually, he has a memorable stunt sequence on the ladder of a fire engine, because that story arc doesn't just give him a redux of his reunion with Tricia, it brings him back to the all-American hero that he started out as in Desert Storm.

I still don't know quite where he plucked his *Leaving Las Vegas* performance from, because there are only hints in his First Thirty of that level of acting ability, even in his best movies, but, after that picture, it doesn't surprise at all when he brings nuance to a role that wouldn't feature any nuance in the hands of most A-list action stars.

Add some nice explosions and a whole slew of hilarious lines, most of them regarding the plush bunny that Poe's taking to his daughter for her birthday, and this is an enjoyable ride.

It's certainly not the best film ever made or the best action film or even the best action film that Nicolas Cage made in 1997, but it's a solid couple of hours of entertainment, a good follow-up to *The Rock* with a serious step up on the cards next, in *Face/Off*.

JOHN
TRAVOLTA/
NICOLAS
CAGE
IN ORDER TO TRAP HIM, HE MUST BECOME HIM.
FACE/OFF
PARAMOUNT PICTURES PRESENTS A DOUGLAS/REUTHER PRODUCTION A WCG ENTERTAINMENT PRODUCTION
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WRITTEN BY MIKE WEBB & MICHAEL COLLEARY DIRECTED BY JOHN WOO
www.face-off.com

FACE/OFF (1997)

DIRECTOR: JOHN WOO

WRITER: MIKE WERB AND MICHAEL COLLEARY

STARS: JOHN TRAVOLTA, NICOLAS CAGE, JOAN ALLEN AND ALLESANDRO NIVOLA

Well, it's been a fun journey through Cage's First Thirty films and it's been an educational one for me. Watching him grow through good and bad movies, as well as good and bad acting decisions, I've gained a newfound appreciation for his talent. Following these up with a look at *The Unbearable Weight of Massive Talent* was a sheer joy. So much more there makes sense to me now than would have done otherwise.

And what a way to end a First Thirty! I have seen *Face/Off* before, because I'm a fan of John Woo's Hong Kong movies and this was the first time he had enough creative control to bring that high octane style to Hollywood. Watching afresh, decades after my last viewing, it holds up wonderfully.

As you might imagine from the poster, this is all about two people who want nothing out of life more than to stop each other. Everyone else is only in the film to be a human prop for one or both to use in that epic battle.

John Travolta is Special Agent Sean Archer who's shot during the opening credits, while riding a carousel with his son, Michael, who's killed with the same bullet. That bullet is fired from a sniper rifle by Castor Troy, who isn't so much a criminal as a professional supervillain who should be locked up in Arkham Asylum. Needless to say, Troy is played by Nicolas Cage with every intention to go full on gonzo.

Six years later, Archer is working on an FBI anti-terrorist team and Troy is doing whatever sociopaths do, and I don't just mean banging his head to a rendition of the *Hallelujah Chorus* while disguised as a priest. He's got something planned for the 18th that's really big.

Yes, it's all stylised. Yes, Cage is outrageous, just as Travolta is a boring good guy, and both are tough. Yes, there's action dripping off the screen from the outset. The first big scene has Archer finally catch his nemesis on the world's second longest runway (it's utterly ridiculous but it has nothing on *Fast & Furious 6*). There's patented John Woo double fisted gun action, swinging on chains, dramatic standoffs.... all the good stuff us Woo fans want to see. When Troy is eventually blown down a windtunnel by a jet engine, it's all finally over. Except that we're not even twenty minutes into the film. It's only just begun! We'll have to wait for the inevitable scene with a dove in a church. Trust me on that one.

So, here's where it gets complicated. Castor has a brother, inevitably named Pollux, who says that the 18th is the date for their biblical plague and won't talk to anyone except Castor, who's dead. Except he isn't. He's in a coma at the Walsh Institute where Dr. Malcolm Walsh can make Archer into Troy.

Bear in mind this is 1997 so the tech is both highly futuristic and notably dated. But this is a "temporary trade" using a "state of the art morpho-genetic template" that's "completely reversible". That's B-movie gold, a whole dab

of pseudo-scientific nonsense that only makes sense in the movies.

So, Archer can borrow Castor's own face, go undercover in a brutal futuristic prison where everyone wears magnetic boots to get the dirt from Nestor, pass that back to the FBI and thus stop whatever's set for the 18th. And it works! Except there's a catch.

While Archer is still inside in his surgically applied Castor Troy disguise, a secret known only to select people, the real Troy wakes from his coma, murders the doctors and burns the clinic to the ground, after borrowing Archer's face from its *Futurama* jar. So now, Archer is a locked up Troy with no way out but Troy is a very free Archer, ready to step right into his life. What's an incognito hero to do?

It's all a little schizophrenic but that's what makes it such fantastic cinema. Cage now has to play Travolta playing Cage playing Castor Troy, while Travolta has to play Cage playing Travolta playing Archer. And that's joyous!

It means that Cage, who started out in full gonzo mode, albeit a very bearable gonzo for once, is tasked with toning that way down to pass for a decent upstanding FBI agent, while retaining some psychopath because that's who he is. It doesn't hurt that he can take all credit for disarming a bomb he set as his real self in a way that makes his fake self seem like a hero.

And Travolta, who began as an obssessed agent with broken relationships to his family, has to turn it up to be credible as a legendary crazy dude, all while planning his escape from what seems to be an inescapable prison. It's a freeing experience in some ways because now he's not required to follow rules.

Oh yeah, this is fun! However, it's fun on a few different levels. It's fun as an action movie with two very capable actors living up to the expectations John Woo has for them. It's fun as a psychological nightmare, for both of them but especially Travolta as Cage. He's wearing the face of the man who killed his son and that man is now working his job, sleeping with his wife and corrupting his daughter. Talk about brutal trauma!

On a deeper level, it's also fun as metaphor, most obviously in Archer's daughter changing her look every week. We think it's because she isn't just a teenage girl but one traumatised by the loss of her younger brother and how her parents are broken by it too. Yet when Cage as Travolta sees this, he sees through it and tells her that it's obvious that she's been wearing someone else's face since Michael died.

This is fun on every level there is, except for the one about believability. OK, maybe we can see through plenty of the stuntwork because it's surely not Travolta and Cage doing much of it, but that's no big deal.

However, just think about the premise for a single moment and it all falls apart. You have to let this film take you on a ride, suspending disbelief, and it's a more glorious, more over-the-top, more action-filled action movie than *The Rock* and *Con Air* put together, while also tweaking our heartstrings with little twists in the tale that I won't spoil. Woo was always a master at setting innocence in the middle of ultra-violence and he does that here with his usual sense of style, even putting a version of *Over the Rainbow* to fantastic use.

So this is fun and it's a perfect way to wrap up Nicolas Cage's First Thirty. He started out as a nephew but took a new name to become nobody, then became somebody, got noticed, got unnoticed, won an Oscar and ended up an abiding name, Nicolas Motherfucking Cage.

SUBMISSIONS

I welcome submissions to Apocalypse Later Music, though I can't guarantee that everything submitted will be reviewed.

Please read the following important notes before submitting anything.

I primarily review the good stuff. There's just too much of it out there nowadays to waste any time reviewing the bad stuff. Almost everything that I review is, in my opinion, either good or interesting and, hopefully, both. I believe that it's worth listening to and I recommend it to some degree, if it happens to be your sort of thing. Now, if you're a die hard black/death metalhead, you might not dig any of the psychedelic rock and vice versa. However, maybe you will! Open ears, open minds and all that.

I have zero interest in being a hatchet man critic who slams everything he writes about. I'll only give a bad review if it's in the public interest, such as a major act releasing a disappointing album. Even then, I'll often keep away.

If I do review, I'll still be completely honest and point out the good and the bad in any release.

I'm primarily reviewing new material only. Each month at Apocalypse Later Music, I review releases from the previous two months. I might stretch a little beyond that for a submission, but not far. Each January, I also try to catch up with highly regarded albums and obvious omissions from the previous year that I didn't get round to at the time. I then bundle my reviews up at the end of a quarter and publish in zine form midway through the following month.

I'm especially interested in studio albums or EPs that do something new and different. I try to review an indie release and a major band each weekday, one rock and one metal, with each week deliberately varied in both genres and countries covered.

If you still want to submit, thank you! You can do so in a couple of ways:

1. Digital copy: please e-mail me at hal@hornsablaze.com a link to where I can download mp3s in 320k. Please include promotional material such as an EPK, high res cover art, etc.
2. Physical: e-mail me for a mailing address.

Either way but especially digitally, please include any promotional material such as a press kit, high res cover art, band photo, etc.

And, whether you submit or not and whether I liked it or not, all the best with your music! Don't quit! The world is a better place because you create.

Submissions of books for review at the Nameless Zine wouldn't come to me directly. If you have books that fit the scope of a predominantly science fiction/fantasy/horror e-zine, please see the contact details at the bottom of the main page at thenamelesszine.org.

I don't review film submissions much any more, as most of my film reviews are for books.

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ABOUT HAL C. F. ASTELL

While he still has a day job to pay the bills, Hal C. F. Astell is a teacher by blood and a writer by the grace of the Dread Lord, which gradually transformed him into a film critic. He primarily writes for his own site, Apocalypse Later, but also anyone else who asks nicely. He writes monthly book reviews for the Nameless Zine.

Born and raised in the cold and rain of England half a century ago, he's still learning about the word "heat" many years after moving to Phoenix, Arizona where he lives with his much better half Dee in a house full of critters and oddities, a library with a ghost guard ferret and more cultural artefacts than can comfortably be imagined. And he can imagine quite a lot.

Just in case you care, his favourite film is Peter Jackson's debut, *Bad Taste*; his favourite actor is Warren William; and he believes Carl Theodor Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* is the greatest movie ever made.

He reads science fiction, horror and the pulps. He watches anything unusual and much that isn't. He listens to everything except mainstream western pop music. He annoys those around him by talking too much about Guy N. Smith, Doc Savage and the *Friday Rock Show*.

He tries not to go outdoors, but he's usually easy to find at film festivals, conventions and events because he's likely to be the only one there in kilt and forked beard, while his fading English accent is instantly recognisable on podcasts and panels. He hasn't been trepanned yet, but he's friendly and doesn't bite unless asked.

Photo Credit: Dee Astell

My personal site is Dawtrina. I run Smithland, a Guy N. Smith fan site. I founded and co-run the CoKoCon science fiction/fantasy convention. I co-founded the Arizona Penny Dreadfuls. I've run the Awesomelys since 2013. I write for the Nameless Zine.

The Arizona Penny Dreadfuls	azpennydreadfuls.org
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CoKoCon	cokocon.org
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The Nameless Zine	thenamelesszine.org
Smithland	guynsmith.rocks

ABOUT APOCALYPSE LATER

Initially, Hal C. F. Astell wrote film reviews for his own reference as he could never remember who the one good actor was in forgettable episodes of long crime film series from the forties. After a year, they became long enough to warrant a dedicated blog.

The name came from an abandoned project in which he was reviewing his way through every movie in the IMDb Top 250 list. Its tentative title was a joke drawn from covering *Apocalypse Now* last and it stuck. It didn't have to be funny.

Gradually he focused on writing at length about the sort of films that most critics don't, such as old films, foreign films, indie films, local films, microbudget films, and so on, always avoiding adverts, syndication and monetised links, not to forget the eye-killing horror of white text on a black background. Let's just get to the content and make it readable.

Four million words later and Apocalypse Later Press was born, in order to publish his first book, cunningly titled *Huh?* It's been followed by plenty more with double digits worth of others always in process.

This growth eventually turned into the Apocalypse Later Empire, which continues to sprawl. In addition to film and book reviews, he posts a pair of album reviews each weekday from across the rock/metal spectrum and around the globe. He runs the only dedicated annual genre film festival in Phoenix, Arizona, the Apocalypse Later International Fantastic Film Festival, or ALIFFF. He publishes books by himself and others. He presents programs of quality international short films at conventions across the southwest.

Apocalypse Later celebrated its fifteenth anniversary in 2022.

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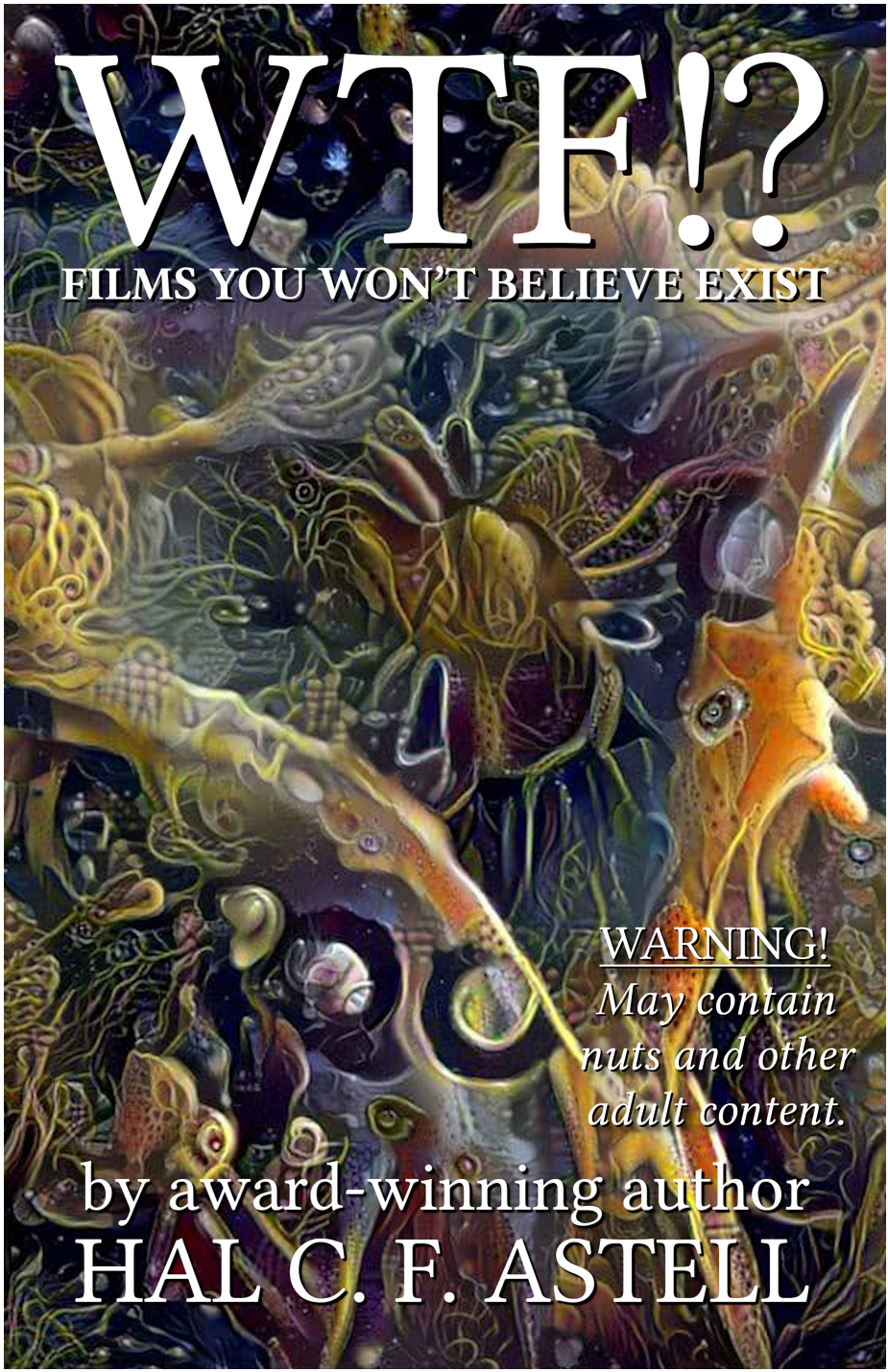
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Academy Award-winner. Gonzo scenery chewer.
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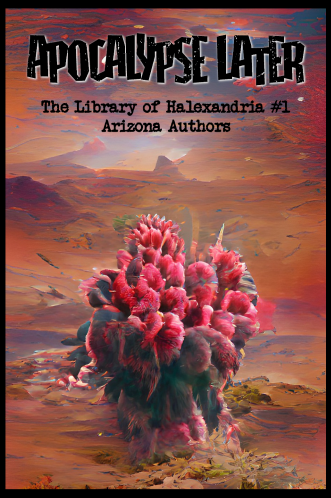
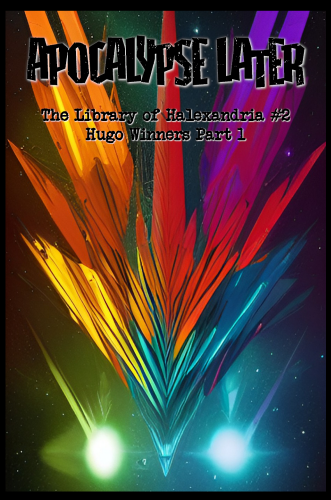
Whatever we call him, Nicolas Cage is never less than magnetic to watch. In this zine, film critic Hal C. F. Astell takes a look at how his career began by examining his First Thirty films, from *The Best of Times* to *Face/Off*.





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