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The Entertainers Issue

ISSUE 7, JANUARY 2020 | FEATURING: THE FABULOUS BAKER BOYS | WHO FRAMED
ROGER RABBIT | PUNCHLINE | GIRLS JUST WANNA HAVE FUN | THIS IS SPINAL TAP
KNIGHTRIDERS | THE BIG PICTURE | and BIG TOP PEE-WEE

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The Entertainers Issue

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GIRLS, ON FILM ISSUE #7

JANUARY 2020

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LIGHTS. CAMERA. ACTION.

Thanks for checking out the seventh issue of *Girls, on Film*, the zine that is hopelessly devoted to 80's movies. For each issue, we pick a theme and eight movies to discuss related to that theme. We cover all kinds of movies, not just the so-called chick flicks. You can find all of our back issues for free online on our website.

In this issue, we put the spotlight on entertainers. Everything from musicians, to dancers, stand-up comedians, circus performers, a Renaissance Festival troupe, filmmakers, and even cartoon actors!

KNIGHTRIDERS (1981) George Romero takes a break from horror films to write and direct a movie about Renaissance Festival performers on motorcycles starring Ed Harris.

THIS IS SPINAL TAP (1984) Rob Reiner captures all the rock band excess in a mockumentary about British metal band Spinal Tap on their ill-fated comeback tour.

GIRLS JUST WANNA HAVE FUN (1985) Sarah Jessica Parker enters a reality TV dance competition to win a spot on *DanceTV*.

BIG TOP PEE-WEE (1988) Pee-wee lives on a farm, has a talking pig, and tries to join a circus, all while cheating on his fiancée.

WHO FRAMED ROGER RABBIT (1988) Roger Rabbit seeks help from a washed-up detective when he's framed for the death of Toontown's beloved owner.

PUNCHLINE (1988) Sally Field is a homely housewife and Tom Hanks is an asshole med school flunkee in this tale of two stand-up comics.

THE BIG PICTURE (1989) Christopher Guest's directorial debut is a scripted look at the making of a major Hollywood movie.

THE FABULOUS BAKER BOYS (1989) Brothers Jeff and Beau Bridges play a struggling piano lounge act who hire a singer to spice up their act.



BEHIND THE ZINES

STEPHANIE MCDEVITT (CO-FOUNDER)

Stephanie's one big disappointment in life is that she wasn't old enough to fully appreciate popular clothing styles in the 80's, as she was mostly attired in paisley sweatsuits. A full-time editor and occasional freelancer, Stephanie looks nostalgically back on 80's films such as *Ernest Goes to Camp*, *Adventures in Babysitting*, and *Can't Buy Me Love* and wishes she could pull off the hairdos of Cindy Mancini and her friends.

JANENE SCELZA (CO-FOUNDER)

Janene has written a buttload of zines over the years. She spent her teen years combing musty video stores for all the 80's movies her hometown had to offer. There

were lists... She's got plenty of favorites from the decade, but it's stylish indie films like *Desperately Seeking Susan*, *Repo Man*, and *Terminator* that she loves best.

KIM ROBINSON (GUEST WRITER)

Kim is a dyed-in-the-wool 80's Sci Fi Fan! From *Flight of the Navigator* to *Return of the Jedi*, she has been full-fledged fan of 1980's fantasy since she could pick up a lightsaber. An avid consumer of pop culture since she was an Arts & Entertainment editor for her college newspaper in the 90's, there is nothing Kim loves more than talking about film and music. She even made a career in the field of arts and culture.

WANT TO GUEST WRITE FOR THE ZINE?

We welcome girls and honorary girls who are hopelessly devoted to 80's movies. Contact us at info@girlsonfilmzine.com.

WHERE TO READ THE ZINE *Girls, on Film* publishes quarterly. All issues are available for free online. Print editions are available to buy at select bookstores and events. Subscribe to our newsletter for more info at girlsonfilmzine.com.



LARPing with George Romero

KNIGHTRIDERS

Essay by: Janene Scelza

K*nightriders* was one of the few non-horror films that George Romero, the Godfather of the Zombie Genre, had worked on in his career. The movie follows a traveling Renaissance Festival troupe that becomes divided over whether to sign with talent agents. Their king, played by a very young, terminally serious Ed Harris, is wary of outside forces and struggles to keep his kingdom together.

I didn't care much for this movie when I first found it back in the 90's. It is already an odd subject for a film made stranger by the fact that the king, Billy, takes this Ren Fest thing way too seriously. He imagines himself in an eternal medieval fairytale stubbornly dictated by an Arthurian code of honor that often conflicts with the modern world. The film opens with him self-flagellating in the river and then meditating with his sword in the nude while his queen, Linet (Amy Ingersoll), watches, looking pained.

I had originally picked this movie up because it's a Romero film. What had compelled George Romero, who had worked exclusively in horror by this point, to write and direct not just a non-horror movie, but this kind of non-horror movie? Interviews later in his life and retrospectives published after his death in 2017 finally shed some light on the answer: *Knightriders* is art imitating life.

As *Dissolve* summed it up: "*Knightriders* can be interpreted as a metaphor, standing for Romero's attempt to keep his circle of non-Hollywood mavericks intact in the wilds of Pennsylvania, at a time when men with fat wallets and small minds were flocking around them, distracting them with offers of big paychecks in exchange for big compromises." [1] The King is Romero's self-insert.

Billy doesn't just loathe smooth-talking promoters, but any attempt to destroy this no-

MOVIE DETAILS: Released April 10, 1981 / Written & Directed by George A. Romero

bility he imagines. He even flips out on a boy who asks him to autograph his photo in a motorcycle magazine (they ride bikes instead of horses) because he doesn't want to be mistaken for an Evel Knievel type.

His knight, Morgan (played by Tom Savini and his gorgeous feathered hair), doesn't mind. He savors the spotlight and joined the group because he loves riding bikes, not because of some "spiritual fix." Morgan is far more pragmatic than Billy, aware of the cost of doing business, and he thinks that he'd make a better king. In a way, Morgan gets his wish, leading the small faction that eventually take their chances with the promoters.



BILLY AIN'T NO EVEL KNieVEL.

The troupe's shows are becoming more popular, though Billy criticizes the slovenly spectators they attract (Stephen King makes a cameo as one). The Ren Fest concept started in the late 60s, and this may have been how the primitive ones looked: parades down Main Streets and shows held in rural fields. [2]

The main attraction is the demolition-derby style tournaments between weapon-wielding knights. Sometimes, they invite the locals. Billy competes, too. Romero applies his typical quick-cutting style to these scenes, building intensity like an orchestral piece. There's some blood and wreckage, some of which was no doubt an unplanned part of the film's production.



THE OTHER KING (STEPHEN).

Knightriders at first glance seems like a very busy film; the sprawling cast spends a lot of time debating the future of a business flanked by action sequences. *Dissolve* estimated that "*Knightriders* is about 50 percent scenes of kick-ass moto-jousting, 40 percent philosophizing around the campfire, and 10 percent lyrical shots of King William trying to exist in the same landscape as fast-food restaurants." [3]

It is also 100 percent a fantasy film. Romero never truly departs from the story of a King on a quest to save his quickly dissolving kingdom from the dragon (i.e., commercialization). It all begins when Billy refuses (over Morgan's protests) to pay off local cops who come sniffing for a bribe. One of the cops later retaliates, forcing the group to scatter and nearly miss their next show.

Billy later reunites with some of the troupe and finds them casually discussing business. He accuses them of having a council meeting against the rules. Some in the group finally have enough of Billy's fantasyland bullshit, including Morgan and a handful of riders he recruits to join him in signing with the promoters. The film follows the various factions in their journey. The tournament scenes mirror that conflict.

Morgan's group get a little taste of the Hollywood treatment (in cushy Washington, DC). But, the halcyon ultimately proves to

be disappointing. In one scene, Morgan's buddies rag on him while he's perched on a throne, half-naked, in a very 1970s *Playboy* style photo shoot. (I hope Tom Savini proudly hung this picture for many years after).



TOM SAVINI'S BODACIOUS MANTLE PICTURE.

Billy is convinced that the Code is too strong for even the defectors to completely deny. And he's right. The misguided knights (and their Friar Tuck) return to the kingdom in time for their next show. They make amends and Billy prepares to compete in the final battle, leaving open the question of whether dogmatic antiquity will cede to the modern world. Billy is pure idealism; he has nothing else. It is what *Time Out London* described as: "post-*Easy Rider* utopianism". [4]



ONCE YOU'RE A JET, YOU'RE ALWAYS A JET.

I have mentioned in my previous essays how much I love those movies borne out of that sweet spot between having the resources to get it made, but with the privilege of avoid-

ing too much (if any) studio interference. They're not always great films, and even when they do get made, they don't always escape sabotage in distribution or marketing. But they often feel like real labors of love. (Check out the *Repo Man* and *Tokyo Pop* essays in our first issue).

Knightriders is one of those Sweet Spot movies. Romero basically had a blank check to make whatever he wanted after the mega success of *Dawn of the Dead*. Anne Thompson, who was on the set of *Knightriders*, wrote that it was "the first film of three financed and released through United Film Distribution, which gave Romero a level of independence he never found again. He was the happy leader on the set in Pittsburgh, marshaling his cast and crew." [5]

Unfortunately, *Knightriders* wasn't much of a commercial success. Its dismal performance at the box office sealed "Romero's fate as horror-meister and zombie-wrangler." [6] In some of his last interviews, Romero said that people still approached him about the movie at conventions, having discovered (or re-discovered) it on home video or the Internet.

I have warmed to *Knightriders* since first watching it way back when. It's a one-of-a-kind cult flick. The cast is way too big to follow, but the characters feel genuine (I didn't have space to discuss openly gay and feminist characters that weren't reduced to caricatures). And the Ren Fest action sequences are great to watch.

Knightriders also offers bittersweet insight into Romero's view of Hollywood. King Billy may be a strange dude, but being protective about something you create, either by yourself or with others, is no less relatable.

I recommend checking it out. Check Amazon Prime. There is also a quality bootleg available on YouTube (as of this writing).



Tap into America

THIS IS SPINAL TAP

Essay by: Kim Robinson

You have binge-watched *The Office*. You've seen *Borat*. You've checked out indie darlings like *What We Do in the Shadows*. However, you can argue that all of these mockumentaries stand on the shoulders of the true original, *This is Spinal Tap: A Rockumentary* by Martin DiBergi.

Directed by a very young Rob Reiner, this 1984 rock and roll classic immerses viewers in the world of England's loudest (and most punctual) heavy metal band, Spinal Tap, as they embark on their epic 1982 Tap into America comeback tour ahead of the release of their latest album, *Smell the Glove*.

The movie is filmed in such realistic fashion that many have mistaken the cast of Spinal Tap for a real band. This influential film is a comedy cult classic and a cornerstone in modern pop culture. Despite (or maybe because of) its many comedic elements, when

revisiting the film for this review it was a pleasure to discover that *This is Spinal Tap* is not only as funny as I remembered, but it is actually a thoughtful commentary on the music industry, the fleeting nature of celebrity, and the trappings of fame.

Christopher Guest (as Nigel Tufnel), Michael McKean (as David St. Hubbins -- a name inspired by David St. Holmes), and Harry Shearer (as Derek Smalls) lead the troupe of zany characters, peppered with cameos from Billy Crystal, Fran Drescher, Fred Willard, Angelica Houston and a who's who roster of music and film stars. The audience gets a front row seat as our rockers, led by their beleaguered manager, Ian Faith (Tony Hendra), myopically careen through a disastrous tour with rapidly diminishing returns, including the disastrous release of *Smell the Glove* (its all-black cover is a send up of the Beatles' *White Album*).

MOVIE DETAILS: Released March 2, 1984 / Written by Christopher Guest, Michael McKean, Harry Shearer & Rob Reiner / Directed by Rob Reiner



A PLAUSIBLE SECOND-VOMITER THEORY.

Interspersed throughout the mockumentary are interviews and overheard stereotypical Hollywood conversations, which serve as a hilarious addition to the band's stage performances. In the definitive climax, Spinal Tap tries to create an "epic" performance for their hit song, "Stonehenge." The result is a mis-scaled Stonehenge megalith (actually only 18 inches) descending on the stage, accompanied by "leprechauns" dancing an Irish jig. IT. IS. BRILLIANT.



PARODYING THE SPENCER DAVIS GROUP.

The mockumentary plays out like a classic rock biopic and you can clearly see the influences of famous 60's, 70's, and even 80's bands, such as the Beatles and the Who, and classic rock documentaries like *Gimme Shelter* or *Don't Look Back*. (Spinal Tap's members experimented with other genres before becoming a metal band). There is even the infamous Yoko Ono type character who causes rifts in the band. Jeanine Petribone (June Chadwick), David's yoga-lov-

ing girlfriend, could be every conniving girlfriend.

Almost every line from *This is Spinal Tap* is quotable. A few of my favorite memorable lines include: "Armadillos in our trousers," "This goes to 11," "Our Appeal is becoming more selective," and "I'm sure I'd feel much worse if I weren't under heavy sedation." There is also the disturbing ongoing gag of the gruesome demise of the band's drummers whose causes of deaths -- spontaneous combustion, gardening accident, and choking on someone else's vomit -- sound like Mad Lib entries.

These visual gags are also presented with deadpan delivery and perfect comedic timing, which demonstrates the liberty the actors had to truly bring these characters to life. Because nearly the whole film is improvised, Rob Reiner wanted to give writing credits to the entire cast. His request was denied by the Writer's Guild. [1]

With a limited production budget of \$2.5 million, Rob Reiner crafted a quick-witted and well-paced film with incredible cinematography that managed to recreate the experience of being live at a rock concert while simultaneously shooting a documentary. The film was a moderate box office success, only grossing \$4.7 million following its initial release in March 1984. [2] It would, however, go on to become a massive cult hit.

This is Spinal Tap was well-received by noted critics at the time, including Roger Ebert, who praised the film's affection rather than cruelty in regards to "these three fragile egos." [3] Janet Maslin of *The New York Times* zeroed in on what would later make the film accessible to so many fans: "there's an in-joke quality to the film, one that will make it all the more hilarious to anyone at all knowledgeable about either the aesthetic or the business aspects of pop music." [4]

Indeed, many notable musicians found the movie to be a little too relatable. Apparently, Robert Plant, Jimmy Page, Eddie Van Halen, Dee Snider, and even Eddie Vedder have referenced similarities between their own lives and the movie's plot. [5] According to *Vanity Fair*: "As Reiner said on the pre-show carpet, these moments of realism are what helped bring the rock world into the film's fold. As they filmed, cinematographer Peter Smokler—who had worked previously on rock docs with Jimi Hendrix and The Rolling Stones kept saying, 'I don't understand, what's funny about this? This is exactly what they do!' But in the end, that was precisely the point." [6]



TAKING METAL TO ITS LOGICAL CONCLUSION.

As I previously mentioned, many viewers were convinced that Spinal Tap was a real band. Christopher Guest, Michael McKean, and Harry Shearer have kept up the charade ever since, releasing albums, straight-to-video reunion tours, and even doing interviews in character. In the ultimate meta moment, the VH1 series, *Where Are They Now?* caught up with the band in 2000. They played it straight during the segment (it was filmed ahead of the re-release of the movie), catching up with the band members, and going over their 18-record discography, highlighting albums such as "Intravenous de Milo" and popular hits like "Sex Farm" (playing at an Air Force base near you!).

The true testament to the film's impact can

be seen in the careers of its stars. Christopher Guest, in particular, would go on to become an influential filmmaker in his own right, directing hilarious mockumentaries such as *Best in Show*, *A Mighty Wind*, and many more (often featuring Shearer and McKean). Rob Reiner would go on to direct a few seminal 80s movies you may have heard of including *The Princess Bride*, *Stand By Me*, and *When Harry Met Sally*.



FOR WHEN YOU ABSOLUTELY MUST ROCK!

In 2019, 35 years after the film's original release, Harry Smith of the *Today Show* sat down with Guest, McKean, Shearer, and Reiner to discuss the film's impact and how they still manage to make each other laugh while describing how fun it was to make this movie. [7] From what started as a non-scripted, low-budget film that evolved from a television sketch show pulled together by a group of friends, *This is Spinal Tap* is now preserved in the Library of Congress and was added in 2002 to the National Film Registry as a film that is "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant."

This is Spinal Tap is a tongue-in-cheek classic that can't miss hit and is definitely not just a fad. At a minimum, the band is a big in Japan.



I Just Love to Dance

GIRLS JUST WANNA HAVE FUN

Essay by: Stephanie McDevitt

We couldn't do an issue about the entertainment industry without mentioning reality TV, could we? That's why I'm here to talk about *Girls Just Want to Have Fun*, a light-hearted movie about a dance competition to win a spot on *DanceTV* (an *American Bandstand* rip-off). I loved this movie as a kid and I love it as an adult. It's funny (sometimes intentionally, sometimes not) and silly and features a lot of dance and gymnastics montages. What's not to love?

Girls Just Want to Have Fun follows Janey Glenn (Sarah Jessica Parker), an army brat who's lived all over the country. On her first day at her new Catholic school in Chicago, she introduces herself to her class and explains that she loves to dance. She's excited to finally live in Chicago because that's where they film *DanceTV*, and it's always been her dream to be a regular dancer on DTV.

Janey makes fast friends with Lynne Stone (Helen Hunt), who, in my opinion, is the coolest. They watch DTV together and learn that DTV is holding a contest for new resident dancers. Lynne convinces Janey that she has to enter the contest. Janey's in, but first she has to clear it with her strict, military dad. Obviously, her dad says it's a no go. He can't allow his teenage daughter to run around Chicago unsupervised, can he?

Thus begins Janey's wild streak of sneaking around and breaking her parent's rules all for the sake of dance. Janey and Lynne head to the contest where, of course, Janey makes the cut to dance in the next round. The producers pair her up with Jeff Malone (Lee Montgomery), a hunky guy from a blue-collar family. Despite the fact that they don't seem to like each other, Janey and Jeff are picked to head to the final round, which will air live on DTV.

MOVIE DETAILS: Released April 12, 1985 / Written by Amy Spies / Directed by Alan Metter



LYNNE AND THE DINO BARRETTES!

Janey and Jeff get off to a rough start and butt heads when it comes to their dance style and routine. All the while they're trying to work out their differences, a rival dancer is trying to take them down. Natalie, an uber-rich snob who always gets what she wants, poses as a nun from Janey's school and tells Janey's parents that she skipped choir practice to go to rehearsal.



JANEY IS TRYING TO BREAK OUT.

In an amazing act of retaliation, Janey and Lynne ruin Natalie's debutante party (with help from Jeff's younger sister, played by 14-year-old Shannon Daughtery). You see, Jeff and his best friend Drew (Jonathan Silverman) were invited to Natalie's party. When Drew shows Lynne and Janey his invitation, they take it, make 150 copies, and invite every punk in the greater Chicago area. The punks all show up and wreck the place while Janey and Lynne watch from the window.

Once Jeff realizes Janey was behind the party stunt, his attitude towards her changes, they start to get along, and then they start to date. Everything is going swimmingly until Natalie's dad threatens Jeff and tells him if he competes in the dance contest, Jeff's dad will lose his job (Jeff's dad works for Natalie's dad's company). Jeff is pissed, and he heads into a rehearsal with Janey and blows up at her. He quits the contest and they have a huge fight. When Janey goes home, her parents bust her climbing in the window and she gets grounded. Will Jeff and Janey make up? Will Jeff Dance? Will Janey cut the wires to her parents' new alarm system and sneak out one last time? You'll have to watch the movie to find out.

Reviews of the *Girls Just Want to Have Fun* were generally tepid. The *New York Times* stated, "The film simply turns the title into an excuse for standard high school antics revolving around the exceptionally (even by current standards) bubble-headed question of whether the heroine, Janey, will win a dance contest and land a job on her favorite television show". [1] Whatever, NYT. With a budget of under \$5 million, *Girls Just Want to Have Fun* returned about \$6.3 million, so it wasn't a total flop.

According to an interview with the *L.A. Times*, Parker agreed to make *Girls Just Want to Have Fun* because she knew one of the screenwriters, Janis Hirsch (uncredited), who wrote for Parker's previous television show, *Square Pegs*. "Janis wasn't into depicting people my age being stupid. I was impressed with her fondness for two best friends who aren't competitive." Parker was also really into working with Helen Hunt. Upon learning about Parker's enthusiasm, Hunt said, "It was really cool. Because I knew she wanted me to do the role, I felt I had the support to overcome my Sarah Lawrence looks." [2]

Helen Hunt as Janey's best friend Lynne is one of my favorite parts of this movie. Lynne



CATHOLIC SCHOOL CHIC.

is the best friend everyone wants. She supports Janey throughout the contest, she helps her sneak out of her house, and then helps her lie to her parents when she gets caught. She also wore crazy outfits to include plastic dinosaurs in her hair and a belt made out of bullets. In the *L.A. Times* piece, Hunt explained her weird fashion choices: “[I] went out and bought all these European magazines--then I did everything that wasn't in them.” [3]



LYNNE STONE OR CYNDI LAUPER?

Hunt and Parker really carry this movie, making good on its title that the girls really do just want to dance and have fun. However, the one thing missing is Cyndi Lauper's version of “Girls Just Want to Have Fun.” According to Wikipedia, the production company (New World) bought the rights to both the song and the title (originally by Robert Hazard). However, Cyndi Lauper refused to let them use her version and her lyrics. So, the movie uses a different version sung by Deborah

Galli. [4] It's interesting to note that the original writer and singer of “Girls Just Want to Have Fun” was a guy. It seems that Lauper rewrote most of the song because the version we hear in the movie is light on lyrics.

While Lauper's voice does not appear in the movie, there are a few notable cameos. First, Richard Blade plays himself as the host of *DanceTV*. At the time the movie came out, Blade was the host of a TV show called *Video Beat*, which was a music video and interview show based in LA. Currently, Blade DJs for SiriusXM playing 80s alt rock and New Wave on their First Wave station. [5] According to 80s Movie Rewind, Robert Downey Jr. is uncredited as one of the punks smashing the hell out of the country club (he was dating Sarah Jessica Parker at the time), and Madonna is apparently in a scene when Janey and Lynne are handing out the invitations to the party. [6] I'll admit, I re-watched it and didn't see her.

If you watch this movie and think that it reminds you of every other dance movie you've ever seen, it's because it follows a specific formula. Jessica Roake wrote an article for *Vulture* about how *Girls Just Want to Have Fun* created the template for future dance movies. She points to all the archetypes, themes, and genre tropes that *Girls* did before *Dirty Dancing*, *Bring it On*, or *Step Up*. She looks to the snobby rich girl/romantic rival, the disapproving parent who eventually comes around, or (my favorite) the one challenging move that they're trying to master throughout the whole movie. [7] It's a fun read and she makes a good argument. Although before you read this article you should watch the movie.



The Circusless Circus

BIG TOP PEE-WEE

Essay by: Stephanie McDevitt

Big Top Pee-wee is the follow-up installment to *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*. It is not a sequel; it's a completely different premise and universe from the first movie. Released four years after *Big Adventure*, *Big Top Pee-wee* isn't nearly as fun or whimsical. In fact, it's boring and disappointing.

In this Pee-wee installment, our hero lives on a farm. He gets up every morning, eats breakfast with his animals, does farm chores with his talking pig, Vance, and works on his agricultural experiments. You see, Pee-wee (Paul Reubens) wants to be like George Washington Carver and come up with a big agricultural invention. He's currently growing a hot dog tree, which is a plot point that doesn't get enough attention.

After finishing his chores, Pee-wee heads into town to have lunch with Winnie (Penelope Ann Miller), his fiancée. Winnie is a school

teacher, and Pee-wee meets her every day for lunch despite the fact that she continually makes him egg salad sandwiches and insists they are his favorite (they are not). Since Pee-wee doesn't tell Winnie that he hates egg salad, he's forced to go into town to get something to eat, and it appears that all the townspeople are old and terrible, and they hate Pee-wee.

On this particular day, a storm blows through and Pee-wee rushes home to get all of his animals into his storm shelter. Once the storm dies down, Pee-wee emerges to find that a circus has appeared on his farm. I assumed they were carried there in a tornado, but there really is no explanation for their appearance. Anyway, Pee-wee offers them a place to stay as long as they need.

Well, Mace Montana (Kris Kristofferson), the circus ringmaster and boss, decides that

MOVIE DETAILS: Released July 22, 1988 / Written by Paul Reubens & George McGrath / Directed by Randal Kleiser



KRIS KRISTOFFERSON ISN'T CONVINCING.

they're going to head into town to do their show. However, since the townspeople are old and terrible, they tell them to scram. They don't want the circus in their town. Mace leads everyone back to Pee-wee's farm where he decides they will stay for a while and work on a new show: A farm-themed circus. What. A. Snore.



VANCE, THE TALKING PIG.

The remainder of the movie follows Pee-wee as he tries to find his own circus act, falls in love with the trapeze artist Gina (Valeria Golino) and ditches Winnie, and woos Gina back because she gets mad at him when she finds out he was engaged. Finally, with about ten minutes left, we get to see the circus. All in all, it's a super boring movie.

Most of the reviews I read about *Big Top Pee-wee* agreed that it just doesn't work. Roger Ebert said, "In *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* and on the *Pee-wee Herman* television program, we can find a zany weirdness, a goofy, fantastical world in which clocks and



PEE WEE TRYING TO GET SOME.

chairs have minds of their own. With every step that Pee-wee takes out of that world and into the real one, he loses some of the wonder of his original inspiration." [1]

Caryn James of the *New York Times* agreed with Roger Ebert. She said, "His first feature, *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*, was a series of encounters between Pee-wee and real life, and his television show, *Pee-wee's Playhouse*, surrounds him with a Pee-wee world where a talking chair is nothing strange. But in *Big Top Pee-wee*, he and the circus world meet each other halfway, with results that are less outrageous than kiddie-cute." [2]

Both of these reviews rang true for me. What fun is it to watch Pee-wee do farm chores and argue with the old people in the town? They could have made Pee-wee a crazy agricultural scientist. He kind of was (he created a hot dog tree), but he was ready to leave that all behind to follow Gina in the circus. What if Pee-wee had done more agricultural experiments and actually cured hunger? What a weird movie that would have been, and I imagine that would have been way more fun than *Big Top Pee-wee*.

The other issue I had with this movie was the insistence of Pee-wee's romantic life. No one wants to see Pee-wee get laid. When he goes to meet Winnie for lunch, it seems innocent enough, until he jumps on top of her while the school children are looking.

Then, when he meets Gina, he immediately cheats on Winnie without a second thought. When he gets caught, he first tries to apologize to Winnie, but she breaks up with him instead. Then he lies to Gina and says he and Winnie mutually agreed to part ways.



WHEN PEE WEE CHEATS, HE GOES BIG.

Pee-wee's behavior with the ladies is terrible. Pee-wee isn't interested in sex in *Big Adventure*, but in this movie, he's a horny jerk to both women. Philip Reed at *Noiseless Chatter* notes, "he's just a sex-obsessed idiot, which is neither funny nor endearing ... especially in a children's film. And after Gina (rightly) dumps his ass for two-timing, he wins her back not with a grand gesture, not by saving the circus, not by doing anything in the least bit selfless, but by bothering her relentlessly, night and day, against her clearly communicated wishes." [3]

In addition to being a creep, Pee-wee seems to have some sort of fetish for running his fingers through women's hair. There are several shots where you see him unable to control himself when the opportunity arises for him to run his fingers through both Winnie's and Gina's hair. When he does it to Winnie, her hair gets all knotted and he ends up hurting her. This weird hair obsession made Pee-wee seem like a serial killer.

Pee-wee's love life aside, the supporting players are totally uninspired. You would think Paul Reubens could have written parts

for circus performers that would rival Chairry, Jambi, or Large Marge, but he didn't. There were standard circus performers (acrobats, jugglers, etc.) and a group of side-show people, including a dog-faced boy (Benicio Del Toro), a bearded lady, a two-inch tall woman, and a mermaid. But none of them do or say anything interesting. Michu' Meszaros (best known for wearing the ALF suit in the TV show *ALF*) probably had the most lines, but never said anything of substance.

Randal Kleiser directed *Big Top*, while Tim Burton directed *Big Adventure*, which was partly why *Big Top* was missing the feel of *Big Adventure*. According to Wikipedia, Burton was already working on *Beetlejuice* and wasn't available to direct *Big Top* (apparently, the financial success of *Beetlejuice* is how Burton ended up directing *Batman*). Furthermore, Danny Elfman scored both movies, but he couldn't use any themes from *Big Adventure* because the movies were produced by different companies. [4]



A GOOD METAPHOR FOR THIS MOVIE.

Overall *Big Top* Pee-wee is a bust. If you're looking for a Pee-wee fix, I suggest sticking with *Pee-wee's Playhouse* or *Big Adventure*. However, if you want to check out *Big Top*, don't pay extra for it. It streams for free with Amazon Prime.



From Toontown to Tinseltown

WHO FRAMED ROGER RABBIT

Essay by: Kim Robinson, Stephanie McDevitt, and Janene Scelza

One year before the start of the Disney Renaissance, which kicked off with the release of *The Little Mermaid* in 1989, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (released by Touchstone Pictures) turned animation on its head and was a box office smash about a cartoon rabbit framed for murder. With its 1940s film noir style, *Roger Rabbit* blended traditional animation and live action using innovative visual effects along with an incredible cast to create an instant classic.

Who Framed Roger Rabbit was directed by Robert Zemeckis with support from animation director Richard Williams (who would go on to win an Oscar for Best Visual Effects and a special achievement award for his work on the film). The film was adapted from Gary K. Wolf's much darker novel, *Who Censored Roger Rabbit?* (Earlier version of the script were just as grim as the novel). The film is set in 1947, at the height of the classic film

industry, in a place called Toontown, where humans and cartoon characters interact. A grizzled, down-on-his luck detective (Bob Hoskins as Eddie Valiant) is hired to investigate the murder of showman Marvin Acme, owner of the Acme company and beloved president of Toontown, for which hapless actor Roger Rabbit has been framed. Numerous iconic cartoon characters pop up to help Eddie and Roger in the race against the clock to unravel the mystery and save Toontown from hungry real estate developer, Cloverleaf, and their creepy financier, the DIP-wielding Judge Doom, played by Christopher Lloyd. (DIP is a mixture of paint thinners used to eliminate pesky toons).

The Cloverleaf company and Judge Doom were based on actual events. In 1940s and 50s Los Angeles (as well as other cities) private corporations were conspiring against public transit, forcing people to rely on cars.

MOVIE DETAILS: Released June 22, 1988 / Written by Gary K. Wolf, Jeffrey Price & Peter S. Seaman / Directed by Robert Zemeckis

(Lot of good it's done us...) In the movie, Toontown is the one thing standing between the villains and their grand plans for a bustling freeway. Doom is practically frothing at the mouth when discusses his automobile-fueled utopian vision. [1]



HONK IF YOU'RE INSANE.

In addition to trying to clear Roger's name, Eddie Valiant is forced to face his demons. You see Eddie was once a hero to the toons as he and his brother formed the detective duo who fought to bring justice in Toontown. However, a toon killed Eddie's brother, and Eddie swore off working for toons after that. Can Eddie sober up and help Roger and the residents of Toontown one last time, or will Judge Doom and Cloverleaf take over Toontown?

Many big names were considered to play Eddie Valliant including Harrison Ford, Gene Hackman, Chevy Chase, Billy Murray, and even Eddie Murphy. Casting director Reuben Cannon said it ultimately came down to a decision between James Woods and Bob Hoskins who was deemed "physically better for the role." [2]

Christopher Lloyd is terrifying as the Judge Doom. Notice that Lloyd never blinks. And, the big reveal as to his true identity is utterly blood-curling. Interestingly, Tim Curry had auditioned for the part, but was turned down for being legit scary. The filmmakers were going more for cartoony scary. [3]

Production for *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* was an incredible undertaking. At the time of its release in the summer of 1988, it was the most expensive film ever made with a budget of \$70 million. (Luckily, it was a huge commercial hit). [4] Robert Zemeckis said it was always at risk of being shut-down because there was "too much time to tinker and think." Mixing live action and cartoons had been done before -- for example, in productions like *Mary Poppins* and *Pete's Dragon* in the 1960s -- but the distinction was in both the length and the process. Fantasy director Terry Gilliam was initially offered the chance to direct, but said he found the film to be too technically challenging, something he later blamed on his own laziness. [5]

It really did seem like quite the technical challenge, both for the people in front of and behind the camera. The production team for *Roger Rabbit* had to conceptualize a full-length film in a way that allowed free movement of the camera and convincing interaction with animation characters.



ROGER WAS TWEETING BEFORE Y'ALL.

Actors performed scenes with props and puppets that would serve as a fill-in for animated characters. Charles Fleischer, who voiced Roger Rabbit, performed alongside Bob Hoskins in a full-body costume. [6] These scenes were then shot again without the props in the hopes of meeting the same eye-line. In addition, the effects team had to manipulate objects in a way that a cartoon

would (such as crumbling sheet rock when a cartoon busts through the wall). The toon world was animated onto the final frames.

The result is a 30-something year old movie that holds up incredibly in the face of modern computer animated cartoons. The Wrap notes that the movie's animators used "traditional pencil drawn animation that gave the illusion of depth and new technology that allowed drawings to be printed directly onto a frame of film" thus giving the characters an almost 3D effect -- a "2 ½ dimensional appearance", allowing them to cast shadows and feel as tangible as the live action actors. [7]



EDDIE'S IN BED WITH THE RABBIT.

While the live actor's physical interaction with their animated counterparts does come across as slightly awkward and stilted, the overall quality of the animation throughout the movie makes up for it. Richard Williams and his team of over 300 animators drew 82,080 frames of animation and it is speculated that over 1 million drawings were made for *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*. [8]

The motion picture score and soundtrack also add a vibrant layer to the film. The simmering jazz score composed by Alan Silvestri evokes a bygone era of the Golden Age of Hollywood. Interspersed with the score are fun and exciting tracks, including Jessica Rabbit's va-va-va vooom vamp style rendition of Peggy Lee's "Why Don't You Do Right."



ROGER RABBIT: THE LUCKIEST S.O.B.

Toontown is occupied both by fictional toons like Roger and Jessica Rabbit (who was voiced by the voluptuous Kathleen Turner, although Amy Irving provided the singing voice), as well as actual iconic characters. Eddie Valliant runs into Bugs Bunny and Mickey Mouse (with a contract that the cartoon pair have equal screen time [9]), Betty Boop, Snow White, Felix the Cat, and many other popular characters from that time period.

Upon its release, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* was a true box office smash, grossing more than \$329 million worldwide. The movie was very well-received by critics. Sheila Benson of the *LA Times* noted how the amazing quality of the film allowed the audience to accept the miracle before our eyes, suspending disbelief as you quickly become immersed in a story that is, "dense, satisfying, feverishly inventive, and a technical marvel" [10] There have been talks of sequels and prequels ever since. [11]

In conclusion, I can say that *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* is a film worth revisiting for a second look. The fantastic performances by the live action (and voice casts), the vibrant and technically brilliant animation, and the added element of a murder mystery combine to create one of the best modern animated films.

A still from the movie *Punchline* featuring Sally Field and John Goodman. Sally Field is on the left, looking slightly to the right with a concerned expression. John Goodman is on the right, looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The background is dark and out of focus.

A Tale of Two Comics

PUNCHLINE

Essay by: Janene Scelza

I have a soft spot for old Sally Field movies. Films like *Smokey & the Bandit*, *Back Roads*, and *Murphy's Romance* are practically comfort food. She always played this witty, humble, down-on-her-luck sweetheart. That is her character here (except for the down-on-her-luck part) in David Seltzer's *Punchline*, a mostly unfunny drama about people trying to be funny.

Sally Field is Lilah Krystick, a middle-aged wife and mother from New Jersey who aspires to become a stand-up comic. Her story is in some ways reminiscent of Nora Ephron's 90s comedy, *This is My Life*, or more recently, Amy Sherman-Palladino's hit series, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, where wives and mothers who become comics have to juggle late-night sets with daytime domestic duties. Lilah is the multi-tasking super wife/mom who can ready a meal and the kids for her husband's guest in record time.

Lilah's children try to be supportive of her newfound interest. Her youngest even offers jokes, first from kid's books and then from schoolyard pals. (Cue the poorly-timed penis joke). Her husband, John (John Goodman), who abruptly wavers between demanding and caring, just doesn't get it. Lilah is always taking care of others; now is her chance to do something for herself.

She performs at a New York comedy club called The Gas Station. (Actual stand-up comics were cast as club regulars, including Damon Wayans and Taylor Negron). Lilah is a homely stage presence in her too-big spectacles and dorky vests. She tells a lot of Polish jokes (she blows money on a batch of crappy jokes just like Miriam Maisel). Though stand-up comics will tell you how awful that feeling is when you bomb on stage, they never rip Lilah to shreds. With some help from a fellow comic, Lilah finds her groove and becomes the audience darling.

MOVIE DETAILS: Released October 7, 1988 / Written & Directed by Steven Kloves



JOHN JUST DOESN'T GET IT.

Lilah story works on its own, but feels out of place in this movie. Writer/director David Seltzer makes stand-up comedy seem like a job for sadists. Said Seltzer: "... [E]very citizen in this subculture was in a state of continual crisis. They were underpaid, fighting for their lives on that stage. Their hours are such and their drive is such that they don't have stable relationships; they don't have family lives. Their closets are usually bare, and they're just ahead of their rent. They're hoping like some anonymous man getting into the prizefighting ring in 1930 and 1940: one lucky punch can change their lives completely." [1]

That's not Lilah at all. She's wholesome and well-adjusted. She has a happy marriage and a good relationship with her kids. She doesn't even seem as fixated on fame as her fellow comics. It's possible her character was salvaged from Seltzer's original script, which was said to be more akin to the tone of *Fame* with lots of light-hearted characters enjoying varying levels of success. [2] In any event, her story is only half of the movie.

The other half focuses on fellow Gas Station comic, Steven Gold (Tom Hanks). He's a real sour prick most of the time. For the morbidly curious: this is one of the rare times that Hanks gets to be the asshole (see also the 1986 comedy, *Nothing in Common*).

Steven is a natural on stage and the club favorite (though his jokes aren't all that better).



LILAH'S GOT A JOKE GUY AND A VEST GUY.

Lilah asks him for help with her act. He is reluctant at first because he doesn't feel like she has paid her dues in the business. Meanwhile, he has been doing sets at the club every night for years. Eventually, he warms to her and they become friends.

Lilah certainly pays her dues hanging around Steven who is a real sob story. He has a lot riding on making it big in stand-up comedy because he doesn't have much else going for him. When the film opens, Steven is expelled from medical school (turns out he's squeamish). He hopes to hide the news from his father and brother, both successful doctors, at least until he's famous enough that it won't matter. Steven's also lonely and dead broke. He pins his hopes on talks of a TV pilot.

He soon hits rock bottom. In one scene, his manager Romeo (Mark Rydell) rushes him onstage thinking some network executives are in the audience, but it turns out to be his dad and brother. Shocked, Steven tearfully confesses a full inventory of his failures to the audience (think the Chunk/blender scene in *The Goonies*, but really pitiful). Later, we learn that the proposed TV pilot will instead be a reality-TV series where comics compete for a shot on Carson. The first show will be shot at the Gas Station. Now Steven isn't even the main attraction.

Lilah sticks by his side throughout, offering encouragement and advice of her own. Re-

views call it an odd romance but it doesn't really feel like one. Steven is in such dire straits, he can't compute her kindness. They meet at a diner before the big contest finale, and he awkwardly suggests to Lilah that she leave her husband and run away with him. The proposal doesn't feel like sincere love, but rather desperation.

At the end of the film, the Gas Station regulars nervously prepare to compete, including Lilah who has a big heart-to-heart with her husband and kids about needing to take a chance or regret never having tried. John finally gets it and decides to attend the taping.

Steven is busy drunkenly heckling the arrivals. It looks like he's going to throw away his big shot at fame, but Lilah summons him for help with an older comic who seems to be having health issues, and then convinces him to stay and perform.



STEVEN, BOMBING ON STAGE.

We see finally get to see everyone in action (I loved Damon Wayans's character, who's "urban" humor just isn't landing). John thinks Lilah is absolutely hysterical, even when her jokes are about him. Steven begins by really insulting the judges before finally getting on with the jokes.

The majority of the movie felt more like Steven's story, but the ending is really Lilah's.



LAUGH OR SHE'LL BLIND YOU WITH SEQUINS!

She beats out Steven in the contest by one vote and graciously drops out to improve his chances. Romeo tries to dissuade her, saying she would either regret it later, or it would go to Steven who would never be as grateful. But, Lilah is satisfied with how much she has accomplished, especially given how much John loved her act.

Seltzer, who worked on the *Omen* franchise and wrote and directed the 1986 teen drama *Lucas*, spent years trying to get the movie made. The script, written in 1979, was based on his experiences at comedy clubs. Howard Zieff (who directed the *My Girl* movies) was originally going to direct but dropped out, and as the story goes, it fell into development limbo until someone at Columbia Pictures rediscovered it. [3] *Punchline* was also intended to be a low-budget picture with unknowns in the cast, but when Sally Field got the script and signed on to both star in and produce the film, they could up the ante for Tom Hanks. [4]

Critics were generally negative about the movie, calling it uneven, though praising Hank's performance. The conflicting characters was intentional; David Seltzer said he was drawn to "tremendous contradiction in tone," adding that they are people in terrible pain who use comedy as a defense mechanism. [5] It's not terrible, but the concept might have worked better without the sitcom-y Lilah Krystick.



I Don't Know Your Work

THE BIG PICTURE

Essay by: Stephanie McDevitt

This issue of *Girls, on Film* includes essays about two Christopher Guest movies. Kim wrote about the Guest-penned *This is Spinal Tap*, and for this essay I look at his directorial debut, *The Big Picture*. While not improvised and not nearly as silly as his other work, *The Big Picture* shows glimpses of what's to come from Guest in the future.

The Big Picture opens with Nick Chapman (Kevin Bacon) winning an award from the National Film Institute for the best student film of the year. In his acceptance speech, he gives a heartfelt thanks to his parents, his girlfriend Susan (Emily Longstreth), and his best friend and cinematographer Emmet (Michael McKean) for supporting him while he made the movie. He seems like a regular guy, a good friend, and a good boyfriend.

What could go wrong?

After the awards ceremony, Nick is approached by studio bigwig Alan Habel (J.T. Walsh), who believes Nick is very talented but knows nothing of his work. He tells Nick to set up a meeting. So Nick sets out to navigate the business of Hollywood in an attempt to bring his next story to the big screen. He hires an agent, Neil Sussman (Martin Short in an uncredited role), and gets a meeting with Habel to pitch his movie idea: a black and white drama about a man having an affair with two women set in a mountain cabin in the middle of the winter.

Habel immediately starts making suggestions that would make the movie more marketable. For instance, he says Nick should set it at the beach during the summer, or have the affair be between two women. Nick isn't on board with all of those changes, but he doesn't want to miss his chance, so he says he thinks he can work with Habel's notes.

MOVIE DETAILS: Released September 15, 1989 / Written by Christopher Guest, Michael McKean & Michael Varhol / Directed by Christopher Guest

Since Nick is so desperate to make this movie, it doesn't take long for him to abandon not only his artistic vision but also his old life. He starts agreeing to the studio's demands, leases a Porsche, and splits with Susan in favor of starlet Gretchen (Teri Hatcher). He also doesn't pick Emmet as his cinematographer, which officially throws a wrench in their friendship. Everything seems to be on track for the movie until Alan Habel is fired from the studio and Nick loses his deal.

With his movie dead and no money to his name, Nick is forced to pick up odd jobs and starts to realize he shouldn't have burned all of his bridges. When he runs into Lydia (Jennifer Jason Leigh), an old friend from grad school, she introduces him to her neighbors who are in a band. They want to make a video and Nick agrees to direct it for free.



THE QUIRKY, COLLEGE FRIEND.

Well, the video airs on TV once, and Nick becomes a hot commodity again. Habel and Sussman and just about everybody else in Hollywood try to track Nick down to offer him work. However, Nick decided to repair his old relationships and is spending time with Emmet and Susan, so he doesn't answer their calls. Could Nick finally have his eye on the big picture (wink, wink)?

Christopher Guest is best known for his mockumentary-style movies like *Spinal Tap*, *Waiting for Guffman*, and *Best in Show*. He wrote this movie with Michael McKean and

Michael Varhol (Varhol previously wrote *Pee Wee's Big Adventure*), but this one is scripted and straightforward, although there are some funny scenes that show shades of the ridiculous comedy for which Guest is known.

When Nick meets with movie executives to go over his recent script draft, they tell him to film the movie in color because movie theaters only have color projectors so they can't project black and white movies. It's such a silly line and totally untrue, but they all nod their heads knowingly. In addition to these one-liners, all of the student movies looked terrible, even though they were up for awards, and the music video Nick directed was really bad.



JOHN CLEESE CAMEO.

Guest also inserted fantasy sequences in which Nick sees his life playing like a genre movie. In the beginning of the movie, as he pulls up to The Film Institute, he sees Nazi guards at a checkpoint. Or when he gets into an argument with Susan, he sees it play out like a noir film. These scenes didn't do much for me. They they felt clunky and slow. I would bet that Varhol wrote at least some of these scenes because they reminded me of the dream sequence from *Pee Wee's Big Adventure*.

The cut-aways that proved to be way more effective were the ones Guest used to show the movie Nick was trying to make. Every time Nick described a scene, Guest cut to

show us the scene in action. And every time Habel or someone else interrupted him to make a suggestion, the actors in Nick's movie would stop and wait for direction, exiting and entering with the studio execs' notes. Not only was it funny, but it also helped to illustrate the disintegration of Nick's original idea.



MARTIN SHORT IS KILLING IT.

The scenes with Neil Sussman, Nick's agent, were by far the most ridiculous (and best) in the movie. When he first meets Nick, Sussman says, "I don't know you. I don't know your work. But I think you are a genius. And I am never wrong about that." According to IMDB, Short was so proud of this character that he regretted not having a credited role. Since he only appeared in four scenes, his role was considered an extended cameo, so he didn't receive a screen credit. [1]

Speaking of cameos, there are many in this movie. Elliott Gould, Fran Drescher, Eddie Albert, Stephen Collins, Roddy McDowell, John Cleese, June Lockhart, and Richard Belzer all make appearances. And while Guest doesn't show up on screen, he and McKean wrote and performed the song that was used for the music video.

While Guest obviously set out to satirize the entertainment industry, it doesn't work nearly as well as it did in his other movies (*A Mighty Wind*, *Spinal Tap*, *Guffman*). However, according to *PopMatters*, while

filming this movie Guest had a life-imitating-art moment. In the DVD commentary Guest explained, "Two weeks into shooting *The Big Picture*, David Puttman, the studio head who greenlit the film, was replaced by Dawn Steel. When the film was completed, [he] had his one and only meeting with Steel, who opened the meeting by saying, 'I talked to all of his friends and they all hate the movie.'" [2] This could have been a line directly out of *The Big Picture*.



FINALLY MAKING THAT MOVIE

While the few reviews I read for this movie were generally positive, *The Big Picture* didn't get much of a chance. It only opened on three screens and, at its widest release, only played on eight. [3] So, my guess is that not many people saw it. I'll be honest, it wasn't my favorite Christopher Guest movie. However, since I was already so familiar with his other work, I think I was expecting something different.

My biggest issue is that, aside from Short's Sussman, the rest of the characters were pretty boring. Guest's characters are usually weird and quirky (like Corky St. Clair in *Waiting for Guffman*), and while the performances were good, there was nothing special about these people. I still recommend seeing it if you're a fan of his other movies. Just manage your expectations.



Sing us a Song, Piano Man

THE FABULOUS BAKER BOYS

Essay by: Janene Scelza

The first and only time that brothers Jeff Bridges and Beau Bridges appeared in a film together was to play brothers in *The Fabulous Baker Boys*, written and directed by Steve Kloves. Jack and Frank Baker are musicians. They've been performing together for the last 15 years as a piano lounge duo based in Seattle. (The establishing shots were done in Seattle while the rest of the movie was actually filmed in L.A.). The brothers are survivors; while acts have come and gone, the Baker Boys have never had to call it quits and get day jobs. Only now, the bookings are starting to dry up.

The brothers are like a fraternal odd couple. Frank (Beau Bridges) is the frumpy business-minded family man. Jack (Jeff Bridges), is the classic misunderstood dashing bachelor and the superior music talent. He's also miserable, sometimes to the point of being insufferable. Their act has become ridiculous. There's the corny banter, the floral shirts,

and tired playlists. Frank even prepares for shows by spraying his bald spot with aerosol cover-up. Jack prefers freestyle performances at a jazz club but stays with Frank instead.

The Fabulous Baker Boys is one of those "guardian angel" type of movies where a damaged free spirit briefly enters the picture to encourage the sullen protagonist to quit fucking around and finally pursue whatever truly makes them happy. That trope has been done to death by now, with so many indie dramas revolving around emotionally stunted 20- and 30-something creatives who hit rock bottom and move back in with their parents to recalibrate.

Jeff Bridges and Michelle Pfeiffer — she plays the aforementioned free spirit — fall into that age group (both were in their 30s). Yet, it's a very grown-up drama by comparison, one smothered in the old school sophistication of

MOVIE DETAILS: Released October 13, 1989 / Written & Directed by Steve Kloves



GETTING STAGE READY.

formal wear, supper clubs, hard liquor, and smooth jazz (did this film feel old fashioned even in 1989?). Cinematographer Michael Ballhaus, who earned an Oscar nod for his work here, sought inspiration in the lonely, muted scenes of Edward Hopper paintings to set the mood. [1]

Frank is hopeful that The Fabulous Baker Boys will they bounce back. He suggests they take on a singer. The disappointing auditions include Jennifer Tilly singing "The Candy Man" in her comical baby voice. Frank is ready to give up when their stick of dynamite walks in. She's cool and tough and has the perfect stage name: Susie Diamond (Pfeiffer). Seconds into a slowed rendition of "More Than You Know" (the musical selections are very on-the-nose) it's clear she's that she's the one who can breathe some life into their act. Into everything.

Susie is a showbiz novice. She's a former hooker with a heart of gold. Sound familiar? Parts of the movie do seem like they inspired scenes in *Pretty Woman*. Susie even gets the brief Eliza Doolittle treatment when she arrives at the first show under-dressed. She nearly blows it on the first song, dropping the F-bomb to a flabbergasted audience in an elegant, candlelit setting, but she quickly recovers to become the respectable center of attention. (Pfeiffer did her own singing for the movie). They book more shows.



A DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH.

Susie is witty and no-nonsense, the perfect complement to Jack. She understands him a lot better than Frank, even catching him one night at the jazz club playing with the rare smile on his face. Their dynamic makes Frank seem like a nerdy tag-along brother (Susie repeatedly refers to him as Egghead), but Frank isn't dumb. He knows his brother's reputation with women and worries that he could screw things up with Susie if they got together.

Jack makes a move. Susie shoots him down. They dance around the sexual tension (quite literally, in one scene) for much of the movie. It's kind of steamy, but hard to enjoy the romance knowing what's at stake. When Frank is called away from a gig at a fancy resort, the mice finally come out to play. Things get weird and then downright nasty.

Eventually, Susie tires of the Baker Boys act. After the umpteenth performance of "Feelings," she calls it quits to take a job singing commercial jingles. Jack hides his heartbreak. She doesn't understand why he stays and warns him about denying his own happiness: "You kid yourself that you have this empty place inside where you can hide it all, but you do it long enough and all you are is empty." She speaks from experience.

And then... BOOM! goes the dynamite. In one of the best scenes in the movie, the Baker Boys finally have it out with each oth-



THE BAKER BOYS AIR THEIR GRIEVANCES.

er. Jack accuses Frank of losing his dignity. Frank reminds him that he has a family that depends on him. Frank is pissed at Jack for ruining things with Susie, but makes the mistake of calling the business his own. Jack tells him he's the better musician. It gets really ugly (and feels like a real catharsis between the actors). Supposedly, Jeff Bridges actually broke Beau's hand in that scene. [2]

The movie thankfully wraps on a more positive note for all three characters, though the Fabulous Baker Boys call it quits. The romance is left open.



WHEN THE CAT'S AWAY...

The *Fabulous Baker Boys* is one of those rare instances where a first-time director knocks it out of the park. Kloves only had one feature film credit (as screenwriter of the 1984 drama *Racing with the Moon*) when he sold the spec script to Warner Brothers. Kloves told *Filmmaker Magazine*: "I've always been

interested in what you might call blue-collar entertainment – people who work in the arts in a kind of working-class way... In the 1960s everybody gave their children piano lessons, thinking it would give them culture – not that they would end up playing at Disneyland or a Holiday Inn." [3]

Unfortunately, this was one of those movies that bounced around studio limbo for a number of years as executives rotated in and out. George Roy Hill, who had worked on *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* and *The Sting* was initially slated to direct, though he and Kloves disagreed on the ending where Hill wanted Susie to follow a big break to Vegas. Fox wanted to cast Bill Murray and Chevy Chase (I would love to know what kind of movie they had in mind). A lot of names were tossed around to play Susie, including R&B singer Whitney Houston, after Kloves had seen her in concert. Michelle Pfeiffer was such a natural here, earning an Oscar nod for Best Actress for this film. (The movie was also nominated for editing and original score).

Despite being a critical darling, the movie was only given limited theatrical release, though it seemed to fare better on home video. About 20 years ago, Jeff Bridges said he'd be interested in a sequel to follow-up with the characters. [4] I usually complain about never leaving anything to the imagination nowadays, but I think writer/director Steve Kloves could have handled that well.

It's a solid little film that never succumbs to many of the tropes found in the "pursue your dreams" type of dramas. Kloves keeps it cool, never sappy. I definitely recommend checking it out.

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