

Entertainment

'Gorillas' celebrates impact of one woman's life

By Judith Trojan

New York (NC) — "Gorillas in the Mist: The Adventure of Dian Fossey" (Warner Bros.-Universal) is a fact-based chronicle of the triumphs and tragedies of Dian Fossey (Sigourney Weaver), a woman whose dedication ensured the life of her beloved gorillas but ultimately cost her own.

For almost 20 years, Fossey, an American educated as a physical therapist and briefly trained in pre-veterinary medicine, took on the nearly hopeless task of saving endangered mountain gorillas in central Africa.

Michael Apted's film, adapted from Fossey's memoirs by screenwriter Anna Hamilton Phelan ("Mask"), opens in 1966 with her commission from British anthropologist Dr. Louis Leakey to take a six-month census of the endangered mountain gorillas in remote Rwanda. Leaving her fiance and her comfortable life in Kentucky, she journeyed into the rugged terrain with one native tracker, Sembagare (John Omirah Miluwi), book knowledge of gorillas and no understanding of the natives who depended on profits from gorilla poaching to feed their families.

Defenseless, gentle creatures, mountain gorillas were slaughtered to market their hands for ashtrays and their heads for wall decorations. Baby gorillas were sold alive to zoo brokers, but their parents often were slain in the process.

Fossey's task was tough. The gorillas initially were hard to find and impossible to approach. But find them she did, and what began as a test of endurance turned into an 18-year love affair with creatures whose right to life became her own personal crusade.

The film records Fossey's amazing ability to mingle freely with the animals and her growing mania about their safety. Ferociously protective of the few remaining gorillas, she methodically set out to destroy all traps and strike fear in the hearts of native poachers, zoo brokers and government officials who would dare diminish the animals for sport or profit.

"Gorillas in the Mist" is an inspiring, beautifully filmed but ultimately sad account of the emotional and physical toll that this life's work had on Fossey. With little initial funding, she was minimally staffed and overworked. Her obsessive routine and single-minded concern for the animals alienated many who might have helped, including potential husband Bob Campbell (Bryan Brown), a National Geographic photographer who filmed her work with the gorillas. Brutally murdered in 1985 by a still-unknown assailant, Fossey saved her precious gorillas but was unable to save herself.

Weaver is a shoo-in for Academy Award consideration as the determined, tough-minded Dian Fossey. Since this was filmed on location, her gorilla mingling is real for the most part and very touching, which makes her frenzy at their slaughter all the more heartrending.

While not maudlin or emotionally manipulative, "Gorillas in the Mist" will leave few dry-eyed at film's end. Although British director Apted is best known for his work on another fine biographical film, "Coal Miner's Daughter," he has a noteworthy background as a documentary filmmaker with special interest in the study of human ethnography.

"Gorillas in the Mist" takes Apted's speciality into new terrain, but is an important dramatized document of human courage, unwavering dedication to the preservation of wildlife and proof that one voice can make a difference.

Due to the inclusion of Campbell's adulterous love affair with Fossey, much rough language, the explicit murder of several gorillas and the wrenching loss of a baby gorilla to a zoo broker, the U.S. Catholic Conference classification is A-III — adults. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG-13 — parents strongly cautioned that some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.

Artistic subculture

Director Clint Eastwood's lifelong fascination with jazz has resulted in a remarkably well-crafted film called "Bird" (Warner Bros.), the nickname for legendary jazz saxophonist Charlie Parker, who died in 1955 at the age of 34.

Wonderfully atmospheric and incorporating some of Parker's original solos, "Bird" concentrates for the most part on the period Parker (Forest Whitaker) spent with common-law wife Chan Richardson (Diane Venora). Screenwriter Joel Oliansky based his screenplay on Chan's unpublished book manuscript "Life in E-Flat" and covers the couple's meeting, union and the fleeting life they spent together

with their own two children and her daughter from an early liaison.

Eastwood does not skirt over the heroin and alcohol addictions that finally killed Parker, contrasting him with clean-living Dizzy Gillespie (Sam Wright), the jazz-trumpet player who with Parker helped establish the be-bop style. Both heroin and booze are shown to be Parker's constant companions.

Whitaker rightfully won the Cannes Film Festival's Best Actor award for his brilliant interpretation of Parker, a role that taps an incredible range of emotions. Parker lived on the edge for most of his short life. Disgusted with his life-threatening addictions, he was inconsolable when he discovered that his white musician pal Red Rodney (Michael Zelnicker) had started his own deadly love affair with heroin.

For Parker fans and those captivated by this strictly American art form in all its variations, "Bird" is an aural and visual feast that stretches almost three hours long. Others will be fascinated by Eastwood's re-creation of the 1950s jazz milieu on both coasts as well as in the very segregated Deep South. Without aiming to be, "Bird" is also an important anti-drug film and one that shows a subculture in which blacks and whites co-habited quite comfortably.

Due to its realistic view of drug and alcohol addiction, incidents of sexual promiscuity, a graphic suicide attempt and Chan's offhanded acceptance of pregnancy outside of marriage, the USCC classification is A-IV — adults, with reservations. The MPAA rating is R — restricted.

Unexplained problems

"Sweet Hearts Dance" (Tri-Star) is a fairly innocuous slice of Americana written by Ernest Thompson, author of "On Golden Pond."

Set in rural Vermont, where people live in cozy old houses that line the town's main street, the film follows its protagonist — Wiley Boon (Don Johnson) and wife Sandra (Susan Sarandon) — through a marital crisis that begins over Thanksgiving turkey and ends happily just before the town's annual Valentine's Day dance.

High school sweethearts, Wiley and Sandra have raised three children but gradually lost much of that loving feeling after 15 years of marriage. Instead of facing and working out their ill-defined troubles, Wiley leaves Sandra and camps out in a trailer at the high school where he is supervising the construction of a new gym.

Through much guilt-instilling interference from their teenaged son Kyle (Justin Henry, former pint-sized star of "Kramer vs. Kramer"); Wiley's best friend, Sam Manners (Jeff Daniels); Sam's mother, Pearne (Kate Reid); and his girlfriend, Adie Nims (Elizabeth Perkins); the Boons have little chance of living out their separation in peace.

Much of this picturesque film, divided into holiday segments much like chapters in a book on country living, focuses on the playful friendship between lifelong chums Wiley and Sam. Although they attempt to hold on to their women, they also keep too firm a grip on their past as juvenile jocks and pranksters. As adults, their attempts to blow off steam from their frictioned love lives merely highlight the physical limitations of age that have crept up on them like ill-fitting underwear.

As scripted by Thompson and directed by Robert Greenwald, "Sweet Hearts Dance" flows gently through its characters' lives, giving a strong sense of small-town America and of male bonding, but a rather weak understanding of the Boon's marital problems.

The actors are all extremely attractive and entertaining, especially Daniels as Sam, an easy-going 35-year-old bachelor who has a hard time shaking his scolding high-school-principal persona. Sarandon carries her angst as an unhappy wife in an appealing fashion, and "Miami Vice's" Johnson is actually believable as a flabby construction engineer who is as confused by his mid-life crisis as the audience will be.

Watching "Sweet Hearts Dance" is like drinking a cup of hot chocolate after a rousing skate on a frozen lake. It will warm you with its final affirmation of marriage and family, but its lack of substance may ultimately leave you cold.

Due to some locker-room language, implied sexual involvement by the unmarried couple, an illicit one-night sexual encounter by the married protagonist and brief flashes of partially nude sunbathers, the USCC classification is A-III — adults. The MPAA rating is R — restricted.



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Sigourney Weaver portrays the controversial anthropologist Dian Fossey in "Gorillas in the Mist." The U.S. Catholic Conference says the film is "an important dramatized document of human courage ... and proof that one voice can make a difference."

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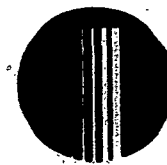
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