

## Entertainment

# Goldberg vehicle lacks emotional depth, drama

By Judith Trojan

New York (NC) — *Clara's Heart* (Warner Bros.), a film about an unlikely friendship between a black Jamaican woman and a white adolescent boy, aspires unsuccessfully to transcend its clichéd plot.

When first we meet Clara (Whoopi Goldberg), she's a busybody hotel maid with enough pearls of wisdom to jolt Leona Hart (Kathleen Quinlan) out of her depression. Leona has just lost her baby girl to crib death and her marriage is a mess as well. But Leona knows a good thing when she sees it and returns home to her privileged, upper-class Maryland home with no-nonsense Clara in tow.

As housekeeper-cum-nanny, Clara faces resistance from Leona's young son David (Neil Patrick Harris). Precocious and pained over the death of his baby sister, David at first stiffly resists Clara's guidance. But when he sees that Clara is his ally against his vapid, estranged parents, the pair become fast friends.

While the interracial mix is an entertaining touch — especially when Clara introduces David to her Jamaican community in downtown Baltimore — much of their relationship pits strong and saintly Clara against his boring, shallow parents. David's father Bill (Michael Ontkean) is an especially shadowy character, a yuppie whose extramarital affairs barely raise his wife's hackles. She merely counters with her own affair with a trendy psychotherapist (Spalding Gray).

The problem with this attempt at a heart-warming scenario is that there is little dramatic tension to involve audiences. Although Clara sometimes speaks her mind in defense of David's welfare, there is an emotional void here that keeps all in their proper, polite places.

David is not abused or unloved, just forgotten at times by his self-aborted parents. But he is so self-sufficient that he seems perfectly capable of taking care of himself and surviving nicely in his richly appointed waterfront home.

As David, newcomer Neil Patrick Harris is fine, but lacks a sense of vulnerability that would make Clara's friendship key to his sur-



In "Clara's Heart," Whoopi Goldberg (standing) stars as Clara Mayfield, a Jamaican housekeeper who uses her wit and wisdom to effect changes within the troubled Hart household.

vival. Goldberg is commanding as Clara, but her character is simply too wise to be believable. Hints about her secret, shocking past thread their way throughout, but do little to ignite the lackluster script adapted by Mark Medoff (*Children of a Lesser God*) from Joseph Olshan's award-winning novel.

Director Robert Mulligan, who has had a magical touch with child actors in the past (*To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Other*), fails to push beyond the obvious to gain insight into the characters of David and Clara. In the end, audiences may gasp and sniffle over Clara's secret and the friends' separation. But questions and emotional distance remain to weaken the film's ultimate impact.

Because of implications of extramarital affairs, some rough language and verbal recollections of the rape of a mother by her son, 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.

### Quirky comedians

*Punchline* (Columbia) has all the ingredients of a dynamite, fun movie — fine actors, a sensitive writer-director and a setting that promises energized characters scrambling to make the grade as stand-up comics. However, in its strain to capture the frenzied, dehumanizing underground comedy-club milieu, *Punchline* loses its focus and its humor.

Basically writer-director David Seltzer (*Lucas*) attempts to zero in on the career moves of two quite different aspiring comics. Steven Gold (Tom Hanks) is a failed medical student with a talent for nasty humor. A popular performer at a fringe Manhattan comedy club

called the Gas Station, Steven is the man to beat when a TV talent search descends on the show one dark and stormy night. Unfortunately, Steven carries heavy emotional baggage that threatens to unglue him.

Lilah Krytsick (Sally Fields) is a partially unfulfilled New Jersey housewife and mother of three young daughters. In the throes of a mid-life crisis, she has convinced her traditional husband to give her space to break into stand-up comedy. When her housework and childcare duties begin to pile up and husband John (John Goodman) demands quality time, Lilah faces more than a midlife crisis.

When Lilah and Steven finally connect as friends, she is desperate for some better material and career guidance, and he is desperate for human contact. She needs a mentor, he needs a mother. Both are emotional wrecks and fascinating characters apart. But together, they lose their edge and the film loses its focus.

Hanks and Fields are superb doing their star turns as quirky aspiring comics. The potential for strong character studies is there but never realized because Seltzer can't seem to decide which character is more important or can't blend them to the film's advantage.

The aging, unhappy housewife comes with a set of timely problems surrounding her decision to let hearth and home slide for a mid-night life as a laugh maker. And the promising young male comic is loaded down with enough family guilt to fill several films. But as written here, the characters are maddeningly underdeveloped and perplexing.

Lilah's story is the more satisfying of the two, in that aspects of her double life are elucidated and somewhat too easily resolved. Yet since we never really see much of Steven's desperate life off stage, his borderline nervous breakdowns on stage are inexplicably gratuitous and almost too painful to watch.

Due to much profanity, sexually explicit humor and vulgarities, and the inclusion of a male comic who entertains as a nun, the USCC classification is A-IV — adults, with reservations. The MPA rating is R — restricted.

## RALPH ESPOSITO FOR STATE SENATOR

### Uniquely Qualified To Serve The Community

Esposito Supports ...

- ★ Lower Taxes
- ★ Improved Senior Citizens Programs
- ★ Improved Child Care Programs
- ★ Strong Ethics Legislation
- ★ Tougher Drug Laws

### A Career Dedicated To Serving Monroe County

- Deputy County Executive
- Deputy County Manager
- President, Monroe County Legislature
- Monroe County Legislature
- Gates Town Attorney
- Assistant District Attorney
- FBI, Special Agent

### The Esposito Family



Alison, Joseph, Ralph, Nancy, Sharon

A CHANGE FOR THE BETTER — A CHANGE FOR THE PEOPLE

Paid for by Committee to Elect Ralph Esposito, Nancy Esposito, Treasurer

POLITICAL ADVERTISEMENT

POLITICAL ADVERTISEMENT

ON NOVEMBER 8, VOTE TO

## RE-ELECT ASSEMBLYMAN

# ROGER J. ROBACH

DEMOCRAT/CONSERVATIVE/RIGHT-TO-LIFE  
134th DISTRICT (GREECE AND ROCHESTER)

✓ SPONSOR OF PARENTAL CONSENT LEGISLATION

✓ SUPPORTER OF INCREASED AID TO PUBLIC AND PRIVATE EDUCATION

✓ AUTHOR OF SOME OF NEW YORK STATE'S MOST INNOVATIVE AND SUCCESSFUL JOB CREATION AND ECONOMIC EXPANSION LEGISLATION



PAID FOR BY CITIZENS FOR ROBACH, JOSEPH CAVALLARO, TREASURER