

Entertainment

New films offer murder, dancing and deep-sea drivel

By Judith Trojan

NEW YORK (NC) — It's never easy for filmmakers to tackle factual topics, especially those of historic and political consequence, without taking dramatic liberties. But often commercial viability forces even credible filmmakers to pump up the truth.

Alan Parker's "Mississippi Burning" (Orion Pictures) may be a case in point. Parker, in walking that fine line between fact and fiction, has raised the hackles of many who lived through the volatile period depicted in the film.

In the fictionalized treatment of the 1964 murder of three young civil rights activists in Mississippi, "Mississippi Burning" changes the names, places and convictions of those involved in the brutal Ku Klux Klan murder and cover-up of black Mississippian James Chaney and his two Jewish colleagues, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman. Schwerner and Goodman, both Northerners, had traveled South with hoards of other young civil rights activists to inspire massive black voter registration.

Faced not with Southern hospitality but with the specter of racism, those involved in that so-called Freedom Summer saw their efforts backfire into a reign of terror against blacks, culminating with the murder of three of their own workers.

Director Parker and his screenwriter Chris Gerolmo powerfully re-create the brutal reality of a racist 1960s Mississippi community where torturing and hanging blacks for sport and fire-bombing their homes and churches was apparently a way of life for many whites.

Into this powder keg Parker sets two fictional mismatched FBI agents, Anderson (Gene Hackman) and his supervisor Ward (Willem Dafoe), who have arrived to investigate the disappearance of the slain activists. As they face a massive cover-up, the G-men conflict both with the townsfolk and each other. Harvard-educated Ward goes by the book and inadvisably pulls in legions of federal agents and even naval reserves to comb the region for the bodies and the murderers. All this accomplishes is more white violence against blacks.



The U.S. Catholic Conference finds Gene Hackman "brilliant as a vigilante FBI agent" in "Mississippi Burning," a fictionalized story of the 1964 killing of three civil rights activists.

Anderson, on the other hand, was once a Mississippi sheriff and, although not a bigot himself, knows how to speak with bigots. He ingratiates himself with individuals in the community, sweet-talking key information out of a deputy's wife (Frances McDormand) and ultimately using Ramboesque tactics to psychologically torture confessions out of the conspirators.

Hackman is brilliant as a vigilante FBI agent who, after sweating through the tragic consequences of Ward's bookish methods, wrests control of the case from his superior and turns

the tables on pivotal conspirators. Surprisingly cast against type, Dafoe is also effective and suitably stuffy as Ward. But both Anderson and Ward — entertaining characters whose interplay provides welcome relief from the unrelenting violence perpetrated on blacks — apparently do nothing resembling the real FBI handling of the case.

Parker does a great job of selling the look and feel of racism in "Mississippi Burning." But viewers should realize that though the film was inspired by a case that prompted the largest manhunt in history and drew international attention to racism in America, "Mississippi Burning" is nevertheless fiction.

Due to unrelenting violence — including close-up views of hangings and bloody beatings — much profanity and the questionable addition of a vigilante storyline to garnish real events, the U.S. Catholic Conference classification is A-IV — adults, with reservations. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R — restricted.

'Tango Bar'

Dance buffs or adults surfeited with the gyrations of Michael Jackson and his rock 'n' roll clones should make an effort to see "Tango Bar" (Zaga Films-Beco Films), a beautifully filmed and choreographed anthology of tango dancing.

Set in Argentina, the electrifying dancing is framed by the personal and political musings of a fictional trio of popular cabaret performers — Antonio, Ricardo and Elena — who are about to be reunited on stage after a 10-year split. Their wildly successful tango show, composed of songs and monologues about the cultural history of the tango, was silenced when Antonio (Ruben Juarez) left Buenos Aires to protest the military takeover of his country.

This move also cost Antonio his lover, Elena (Valeria Lynch), who stayed behind to live and perform with Ricardo (Raul Julia). The 10-year flashbacks and ruminations about their personal and political conflicts take a backseat to flashbacks re-creating their stage act, which is highlighted by some of the most breathtaking tango numbers ever on film.

As Ricardo and Antonio discuss the origins of tango dancing, its evolution and variations are depicted by talented troupes and individual couples. Clips from Hollywood and foreign films that seriously and comically integrate the tango into their scenarios are shown. Among them are clips of Fred Astaire and Valentino — who obviously knew what he was doing — and riotous snippets featuring Laurel tangoing with Hardy, and Fred Flintstone lunging into a cartoon caveman version of the dance.

Expert camera work zeroes in on the complex footwork and body moves that make the tango one of the most difficult and intensely sensual couples' dances to survive and flourish today.

While Julia (an international star of stage and screen), Juarez (the foremost tango singer in Argentina) and Lynch (a leading Latin American pop singer) all contribute their musical talents to this production, it is the dancers, numerous choreographers and the Puerto Rican

director Marcos Zurinaga who deserve the credit for making "Tango Bar" work as an entertaining and educational dance film. The love story and politics are too sketchy to be anything more than distractions to viewers who will never get enough of the dancing, which by today's standards is wholesome entertainment.

Due to implied sexual impropriety, the USCC classification is A-III — adults. Not rated by the MPAA. In Spanish, with English subtitles.

'The Dressmaker'

Although it valiantly attempts to illuminate the often shocking contradiction between one's outward appearance and actual character, "The Dressmaker" (Euro-American Films) is too unfocused and somber to have much impact on American audiences. Adapted from the 1973 novel by Beryl Bainbridge, this British film is so consumed with the everyday details of its characters' grim lives, circa 1944, that it loses sight of its wider message and audience.

Basically, the film sketches the story of three troubled women — two aging sisters and their young niece — who live too close for comfort in a lower-middle-class flat in wartime Liverpool. Outwardly righteous and principled, talented dressmaker Nellie (Joan Plowright) is the staunch matriarch of the family. Unwilling to accept the societal changes brought about by the war, Nellie is armored by the past and maintains their flat as a virtual shrine to her deceased mother.

Reminded by her younger, high-spirited sister, Margo (Billie Whitelaw), that their mother was abusive, Nellie rationalizes that they deserved to be beaten. Margo was a special target for abuse because of her rumored loose morals and flightiness, so Nellie has taken up where their mother left off by verbally chastising Margo and blocking her influence on their repressed 17-year-old niece, Rita (Jane Horrocks).

Motherless Rita is an emotional mess, but brightens appreciably when she falls in love with Wesley (Tim Ransom), a young American soldier stationed nearby. Illiterate and of no real consequence, the boy ultimately catalyzes a tragic chain of events that reveal these women for what they truly are.

Director Jim O'Brien nicely follows Rita's tentative blossoming, her fearsome refusals to allow Wesley to make sexual advances and her despair at having lost him because she won't. Although she frets over Margo's frivolous influence on the girl, Nellie is more than nonplussed when she finds Wesley in Margo's bed. For this shocking behavior, Wesley has no other course left but to die, which he does.

Dismissing Margo's entreaties to do the right thing and call the police, Nellie proceeds to coolly sew the dead boy into some of her best fabric and dump his body where no one will find it. Rita is told that Wesley has run off, and Nellie expects everyone to go on with their lives as if nothing happened.

And so, in its look at these three sorrowful women's lives, we are given a frightening peek at the tragic cost of repressed feelings and misdirected rage, and the knowledge that a righteous outward show means nothing unless it is truly lived.

Because of a graphic scene of violence, some sexual overtones and brief nudity, the USCC classification is A-III — adults. Not rated by the MPAA.

'Deepstar Six'

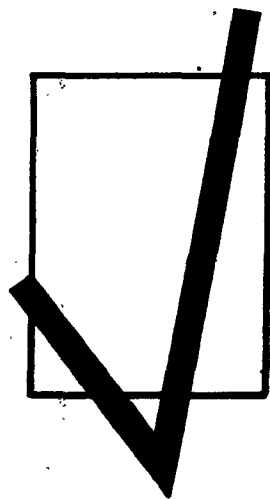
Despite its prerequisite monster of no known species, some ugly gore, wet T-shirts and enough computer technology to send HAL into retirement, "Deepstar Six" (Tri-Star) has about as much menace as a clogged drain.

Submerged for six months in the blue Pacific, 11 professionals (some Navy, some scientists) of varying sexes and unclear ethnic persuasions unsettle a mysterious monster when they dynamite its deep sea cave to create a missile site. The poor beast goes berserk and rips up most of the cast, except for those destroyed by one particularly idiotic technologist, Snyder (Miguel Ferrer), who manages to lay waste to their mother ship.

This is forgettable stuff in spite of its likeable cast of players (Taurean Blacque, Cindy Pickett, Nancy Everhard and Greg Evigan, among others). Since its mindless plot is derived from the worst parts of a half dozen previous undersea- and space-adventure movies, director Sean S. Cunningham ("Friday the 13th") might do better by sticking to landlocked horror and leave the poor sea beasts to Jacques Cousteau.

Due to two brief sexually suggestive scenes, some rough language and several incidents of gruesome gore, the USCC classification is O — morally offensive. The MPAA rating is R — restricted.

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