

Dickensian movie explores bond between father, son

By Judith Trojan

NEW YORK (NC) — The bond between father and son has always been a rich subject for writers and filmmakers concerned with family dynamics. The Danish film "Pelle the Conqueror" (Miramax), adapted from the first part of Martin Andersen Nexø's monumental Danish novel by the same name, uses its father-son theme in this brutal portrait of rural Danish life at the turn of the century.

Projecting an almost Dickensian feel onto his source material, Danish director Bille August tracks the widowed, Swedish Lasse (Max von Sydow) and his young son, Pelle (Pelle Hvenegaard), from their poignant arrival on Danish shores in search of a better life through their many hardships as stablehands on a farm.

Illiterate and elderly, Lasse fills his son with dreams of milk and honey, but all Pelle sees is the degradation he and the rest of the farmworkers experience at the hands of its sadistic managers. Pelle becomes the camera, the eye through which we discover this type of long-ago farm life as it evolved through many seasons of change. Contrasts between the landowners, managers and indentured farmworkers are brought to the fore, inspiring in Pelle a growing rage at the inequities between classes and the torment he experiences, especially at the hands of his privileged schoolmates.

Too old and frightened to make good his boasts of revenge, Lasse incites Pelle to yearn for a better life. In the end, Pelle has no problem choosing between the wretched life his father has grown used to and a journey to America, where dreams can come true.

Director August fills his canvas with stark seasonal landscapes. Although images of genuine kindness exist — Pelle is a favorite of the landowner and his wife — they are outnumbered by those reflecting the sad and sometimes horrifying results of impropriety and brutality. The lecherous landowner leaves a trail of illegitimate children throughout the region, which leads his lonely wife to drink, his virginal niece to ruin and finally himself to his own castration. While the incestuous rape of his niece and castration by his wife are enacted off-camera, the bloody results of these two incidents appear on screen. An infanticide after an illicit liaison between a farmworker and her upper-class suitor is portrayed similarly.

Von Sydow does a touching, often heart-rending character turn as Lasse. This limited man may frustrate his son in his spineless, weak moments, but Lasse instills in Pelle a belief in dreams and the security of their unconditional father-son bond. As such, the boy is empowered to forge ahead without fear.

Eleven-year-old Hvenegaard is less compelling as Pelle. But since the boy is mainly used here to reflect on the harsh life which surrounds him, great acting range is unnecessary.

"Pelle the Conqueror" is a long, often grim film imbued with a strong feel for the landscape and a low level of humanity in turn-of-the-century rural Denmark as well as the life-sustaining devotion of a father for his young son. It is also a powerful, unsentimental affirmation of the ability of the human spirit to survive and even rise above the most impossible degradation, denial and loss.

Due to some brief but graphic images implying the results of incest, infanticide and castration, vulgar language suggesting sexual impropriety and some violence, the U.S. Catholic Conference classification is A-III — adults. Not rated by the Motion Picture Association of America. (With English subtitles.)



Pelle Hvenegaard and Max von Sydow (right) star in the Danish film, "Pelle the Conqueror." The U.S. Catholic Conference calls the film "a powerful unsentimental af-

'I'm Gonna Git You Sucka'

Keenen Ivory Wayans wrote, directed and stars in "I'm Gonna Git You Sucka" (United Artists), his low-budget parody 1970s exploitation films. But good intentions and a very clever concept notwithstanding, the film falls short because of its cheesy production values and self-mocking tone.

Wayans, as clean-cut army man Jack Spade — who proudly sports medals for such skills as typing and surfing — is out to avenge the death of his brother, Junebug, who got hooked on gold chains. Junebug died owing \$5,000 to his white crime boss Mr. Big (John Vernon), the sleazy rake who got Junebug and the rest of the black youth in "Any Ghetto USA" caught up in gold in the first place.

Jack decides to take matters into his own hands and recruit former black heroes John Slade (Bernie Casey), Hammer (Isaac Hayes), Slammer (Jim Brown), Flyguy (Antonio Fargas) and Kung Fu Joe (Steve James) to help destroy Mr. Big once and for all.

Comedy is used to satirize everything from these one-time movie men and their movie theme songs to stereotypes of black pimps, prostitutes, mothers, fashion, language and interracial marriage.

While its tacky look is no doubt part of the satire, the film's scenario is too unfocused, self-mocking and flimsy to inspire audiences to seriously question the media's role in perpetuating offensive black stereotypes. Wayans' string of black jokes and parodies are often comical but uneven. As a result, those in search of a thought-provoking consciousness-raiser would do well to look elsewhere.

Due to much profanity laced with sexual vulgarities and intense comic-book violence, the USCC classification is O — morally offensive. The MPAA rating is R — restricted.

'The Chocolate War'

"The Chocolate War" (M.C.E.G.) tries to parallel teen peer pressure with fascist repression, but its heavy-handed, skewed focus ultimately destroys its credibility.

Adapted by actor-turned-writer-director Keith Gordon from the novel by Robert Cormier, "The Chocolate War" unfolds in St. Trinity's, a parochial school for boys in New City, USA. The school seems inordinately ob-

essed with candy-sale fundraisers.

The chocolate sales are run by sadistic Brother Leon (John Glover), who hopes to play this year's event into a record breaker to enhance his chances for promotion. His maniacal zeal to double last year's quota may also have something to do with the fact that he financed the candy with misappropriated school funds.

Despite the boys' initial indifference, Brother Leon whips up candy fever with the aid of the school's secret fraternity of sociopathic thugs. The Vigils are headed by power-mad Carter (Adam Baldwin) and his intellectual henchman, Archie (Wally Ward). The Vigils pick off underclassmen as if they were the butterflies pinned in the box over Archie's bed. The younger boys are psychologically humiliated into performing nasty pranks against the school and the brothers, a ploy which keeps the Vigils in tight control of the kids. This works until the Vigils try to sabotage the candy sale.

The lackluster hero in this distant clone of "Lord of the Flies" is 15-year-old Jerry Renault (Ian Mitchell-Smith). Naive and vulnerable Jerry is haunted by the recent untimely death of his mother, setting the stage for various artsy mother-son dream sequences. But Archie makes a fatal mistake when he targets Jerry as an easy mark to challenge Brother Leon's inflated candy demands.

Unfortunately, other than Glover, who is a master screen meany, the young, unknown actors do not rise above the obvious weaknesses in Gordon's ponderous script. The actors fail to capture the subtleties of their mean-spirited characters. Jerry may visibly buck his peers and his teacher and cope somberly with their reprisals, but his reasons for rebelling are fuzzy and his lack of interest in gaining peer support is unfathomable.

The film's message about the potentially dangerous, limitless power of peer pressure and the sociopathic individuals who are lured into peer power positions can be related to the political universe at large. But this mighty theme is ultimately diminished by the scenario's small-minded, unbalanced focus.

Religion is oddly absent from St. Trinity's

environs, and the warped view of parochial education as a potent breeding ground for secret anarchy and repression is nonsensically overwrought. Except for the morally bankrupt Brother Leon, the few other religious brothers who flit through this film are spineless fools and no match for the power-mad machinations of their students.

For these reasons as well as its use of some intense violence and vulgar language laced with sexual innuendoes, the USCC classification is O — morally offensive. The MP Association of America rating is R — restricted.

'Parents'

A wonderfully corny send-up of 1950s suburbia ultimately does not save "Parents" (Vestron) from its grisly premise.

Hinted at but not revealed until its ridiculously bloody climax, the theme of this very black comedy is cannibalism. But cannibalism here is practiced on the sly by a quintessential mom and dad right out of "Father Knows Best."

New arrivals in their split-level suburban neighborhood, the Laemle family's only chink initially seems to be their morose, sad-eyed little son Michael (Bryan Madorosky). Michael has recurrent nightmares about drowning in a sea of blood. He horrifies his sugar-sweet teacher by drawing pictures of his parents bathed in a holocaust of red crayon. He's also a finicky eater.

Food preparation in the Laemle's Betty Crocker kitchen and on the backyard barbecue is a big focus. Neatly manicured, coiffed and crinolined Mom (Mary Beth Hurt) prepares gourmet meals that are supplemented with barbecued chunks of unrecognizable red meat and wine from Dad's (Randy Quaid) ominous cellar.

Dad is Mister Rogers with horns. He manufactures defoliants for a living because they're "a growth industry," and likes to hang out in his company's morgue where he pinpoints tissue samples for chemical testing. Actually, he's on the prowl for free slabs of meat.

As directed by actor Bob Balaban, "Parents" takes a long time to get to the grisly truth about these sickos. Time is spent lingering over the Laemles' picture-postcard lifestyle, which works initially as fine satire but drags down as Michael's dismal presence brings glimmers of horror to the fore.

Quaid and Hurt are superb at evoking the facade of perfect parents. And as played in robotic fashion by young newcomer Madorosky, Michael's irrational fears of the dark and his parents stifling control could be taken as symbolic of typical childhood angst.

These plusses aside, audiences who marvel at the film's promising satire of the period and of parenthood will be doubly horrified when it all disintegrates into an incredibly unpalatable Shake 'n' Bake bloodbath. Vegetarians will surely have a field day with this vestal effort.

Due to much climactic bloody violence and grisly implications of suburban cannibalism ad nauseam, the U.S. Conference classification is O — morally offensive. The MPAA rating is R — restricted.

Trojan is on the staff of the USCC Office for Film and Broadcasting.

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