

Films depict family dynamics, time-travel trash

By Judith Trojan
NC News

NEW YORK — British writer-director Mike Leigh shows strong class consciousness and insight into family dynamics in "High Hopes" (Skouras).

This gentle satire focuses principally on one working-class couple, Shirley (Ruth Sheen) and Cyril (Philip Davis), and their interaction with family members and wealthy neighbors who don't share their concerns for economic reform.

While 35-year-old Cyril memorizes the ideology of Karl Marx, Shirley's interests, after 10 years of common-law togetherness, run more toward gardening and starting a family. She also is sensitive to the very real problems faced by Cyril's sour, 70-year-old mother (Edna Dore), who is beginning to lose touch with reality.

As mom sits deteriorating in a neighborhood upscaled by gentrification and yuppies, Cyril and his garish nouveau riche sister, Valerie (Heather Tobias), do little to comfort the miserable old woman. Loud-mouthed, self-centered Valerie shows more affection for her Afghan hound than her mother or her philandering husband, Martin (Philip Jackson). And Cyril is more concerned with his anti-Thatcher political theories than he is with Shirley or his mom.

Leigh fills his scenario with insightful caricatures of classes he would prefer to do without. There's the tasteless, consumer-oriented lifestyle of Valerie and Martin, as well as an incredibly savage portrait of mom's snooty upscale neighbors Laetitia (Leslie Manville) and Rupert (David Bamber).

Leigh obviously has an affection for Cyril and Shirley, who seem to be throwbacks to the 1960s' counterculture, but even this couple has its share of dashed hopes and miscommunication.

A wonderful low-key satire of the haves and have-nots in Britain today, "High Hopes" questions the roles of both groups and leaves the door open for better answers. Leigh also manages to recreate a painfully real family dynamic in which communication and love play minimal roles. Empty chitchat, temper tantrums and sullen silences provide the audience with insights that seem lost on the characters themselves.

Due to some rough language laced with sexual vulgarities, common-law cohabitation and a brief depiction of abuse within an adulterous liaison, the U.S. Catholic Conference classification is A-IV — adults, with reservations. Not rated by the Motion Picture Association of America.

'Paperhouse'

Few will be unmoved by "Paperhouse" (Vestron), a first feature by British director Bernard Rose. The drama, based on a novel ("Marianne Dreams"), focuses on the vivid dreams that progressively overpower a feverish 11-year-old girl, Anna (Charlotte Burke).



In "Paperhouse," Charlotte Burke as Anna becomes consumed with her drawing of an odd, isolated house in a surreal landscape.

Imaginative but troubled by her mother's minimal attention and her father's lengthy absences, Anna becomes consumed with her drawings of an odd, isolated house in a surreal landscape. When her fever worsens, the house and its sole inhabitant, a crippled boy named Marc (Elliott Spiers), consume her dreams. As she comes to love and care for Marc, she attempts to draw comforting elements into the forbidding landscape and provide him with a means of escape.

A psychological drama that suggests but fails to clearly spell out the roots of Anna's problems, "Paperhouse" builds in intensity and menace as the fine line between Anna's real and fantasy life begins to dissolve. Since Marc is an actual boy whom Anna's doctor also treats but whom Anna never has met, the girl's telepathic ties with him move beyond mere nightmare fantasy into a realm with inexplicable yet healing consequences.

Projecting the child's stark pencil drawings into her dreams provides the film with

riveting, surreal visuals, as does the inclusion of her ominous absentee father, who stalks her dreamscape blinded with a frightening mission.

Beautifully shot and scored, and believably acted by the two lead youngsters as well as Glenna Headly as Anna's mixed-up mom, "Paperhouse" clearly visualizes a troubled child's attempts to take control of

her terrifying interior universe. Although some of this film works successfully as a haunting psychological drama, the film's fantasy elements, especially the far-fetched ending, weaken its believability.

Due to intense climactic fantasy violence, an ongoing sense of menace and some rough language, the USCC classification is A-III — adults. The MPAA rating is PG-13 — parents strongly cautioned that some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.

'Bill and Ted'

In "Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure" (Orion Pictures), two of the spiciest teenagers this side of Mars are saved from sure flunk-out with the help of a futuristic genie (George Carlin) and his magical phone booth.

Written by Chris Matheson and Ed Solomon, whose script speaks to the lowest common denominator of adolescence, the boys' escapades in the time-travel phone booth enable them to nab some historic "dudes" — Napoleon, Abraham Lincoln, Socrates, Sigmund Freud, Billy the Kid and, yes, Joan of Arc, among others — and hurtle them back to school as show 'n' tell characters for a crucial oral history project.

No matter that these kids never speak one grammatically correct sentence throughout the film, nor that they think Joan of Arc was Noah's wife, Bill (Alex Winter) and Ted (Keanu Reeves) end up dazzling their peers and teachers with a finale that sees their "historical figures" speaking in jargon only kids will understand.

Director Stephen Herek ("Critters") does little to lift this material above the trash barrel. A cheesy put-down of modern adolescent sensibilities, "Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure" reaches its abysmal peak when the historic figures crash a shopping mall.

Due to some gratuitous vulgar references laced with sexual innuendo and an especially moronic view of education and modern parenting, the USCC classification is A-III — adults. The MPAA rating is PG — parental guidance suggested.

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