

'Gringo' lacks substance; Bad ending dooms 'Thief'

NEW YORK (CNS) — Sacrificing substance for style, "Old Gringo" (Columbia) is a retelling of Carlos Fuentes' novel "Gringo Viejo."

Set for the most part in Mexico during the Revolution, the film opens in 1913 and tracks the play of destiny in the lives of three very different rebels. Harriet Winslow (Jane Fonda) is a spinster school teacher who chucks her dead-end career in Washington and a life dedicated to the memory of her adventurer dad to live her own impassioned adventure.

Hired as a governess to the children of a rich Mexican landowner, Harriet is pulled into the thick of the Revolution when her employer and his family are annihilated by a contingent of Pancho Villa's men headed by Gen. Tomas Arroyo (Jimmy Smits). The bastard son of the landowner, Arroyo has his own personal demons to exorcise after he occupies the palatial hacienda that was always off limits to him as a peasant child.

Closing the gap between Harriet's and Arroyo's two very different cultures is 71-year-old American writer Ambrose Bierce (Gregory Peck), who has come to

Mexico to shed his ties with his hypocritical muckraking boss and to live out the rest of his life with some dignity and meaning.

While the three protagonists are consistently intriguing, the screenplay adapted by Aida Bortnik and director Luis Puenzo ("The Official Story") never manages to clarify the social and political concerns of the period under scrutiny. An early, lengthy battle scene will be especially tedious for those unfamiliar with the good guys and bad guys in this particular historical setting.

A triangular love story is halfheartedly developed and then dropped as is the promising friendship between the two men. Harriet loses her virginity as expected and her discovery of Bierce's real identity comes too late to have any impact. In spite of the script's predictability and lack of clarity, the actors bring much-needed meaning and dignity to their roles and inspire deeper social and political thought.

Peck could be well on his way to another Oscar nomination for his touching evocation of Ambrose Bierce's hypothetical last days in Mexico. Fonda and Smits are fine



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Gregory Peck (left), Jane Fonda and Jimmy Smits star in "Old Gringo," an adventure story set in 1913 during the Mexican Revolution. The movie tracks the lives of three very different rebels.

as well; but despite the fact that the politically conscious Fonda produced this show, the film is as enlightening as a romance novel. In English and Spanish, with English subtitles.

Due to a lengthy grisly battle scene, several murders and some discreetly fil-

med sexual encounters with brief nudity, the U.S. Catholic Conference classification is A-III — adults. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R — restricted.

'The Little Thief'

"The Little Thief" (Miramax), directed by Claude Miller from an idea by Francois Truffaut, is a curious bittersweet French film that tracks the exploits of a 16-year-old with sticky fingers.

Opening in 1950 in a rural French village, the film zeroes in on Janine Castang (Charlotte Gainsbourg), a solemn girl who lies and steals from family, friends, stores, even the local Catholic church.

Janine unconsciously patterns her life after her wayward mom, a woman obsessed with men, money and movies. Facing confinement after she's caught with her hand in the church coffers, Janine is saved by a kindly priest and run out of town by the cops. She takes a job as a maid for a wealthy, young city couple (Clotilde de Bayser and Philippe Deplanche), who mistakenly give her their friendship and trust.

Determined to begin her manhunt, Janine seduces Michel (Didier Bezace), a 43-year-old married man who initially refuses to sleep with her because he is married and she is a virgin. Janine manages to lose her virginity to a handyman and Michel finally caves in. Aside from being the first real lover and only loving individual in Janine's life, Michel also enrolls her in a secretarial school to ensure her future and introduces her to great works of literature and music.

Sadly, Janine is once again diverted into a life of lies and petty crime when she falls for a young thief, Raoul (Simon de la Brosse). After they steal from her employers, she lands in a tough, all-girl reformatory run by nuns. Here, she learns photography from a fellow inmate with whom she escapes. Pregnant and deserted by Raoul, fugitive Janine foregoes a planned abortion and sets off to devote her life to photography.

For American audiences unfamiliar with French films, and especially those unfamiliar with the work of Truffaut, who inspired this film before his death, the far-fetched, romantic ending of "The Little Thief" will seem jolting.

The strength of "The Little Thief," however, lies in its fascinating character study of Janine, a postwar survivor in more ways than one. A product of her time and circumstances, she is a child adrift without love or guidance who takes what she's never been given to gain attention and love. In French, with English subtitles.

Due to its depiction of teenage promiscuity, adultery, inclusion of brief nudity, some violence and rough language, the U.S. Catholic Conference classification is U.S.C.C. classification is A-IV — adults, with reservations. The M.P.P.A. rating is R — restricted.

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