

# Blue collar fairy tale lacks drama, but ends happily

NEW YORK (CNS) — A tale of ordinary people and their problems told so heartwarming that some viewers will dismiss it as old-fashioned melodrama — the same reason others will like it — "Stanley & Iris" (MGM) is the story of two middle-aged people who help each other, fall in love and presumably live happily ever after.

Iris (Jane Fonda) first meets Stanley (Robert De Niro) when her purse is snatched and he comes to her aid. Though they've never met before, they discover that they work in the same pastry factory — she on the assembly line and he serving food in the cafeteria.

Iris, who is recently widowed, has her hands full trying to raise a teenage daughter and a grade-school son on her factory earnings. She still hasn't gotten over the death of her husband and, although she keeps bumping into Stanley, romance is the last thing on her mind.

Stanley is illiterate. When his boss finds out that he can't read the food labels, he's fired as a potential health hazard. Unable to continue supporting his aged father (Feodor Chaliapin), he puts the old man in a nursing home, where he soon dies.

After a lifetime of hiding the fact that he

can't read, Stanley screws up his courage and asks Iris to help him learn. It isn't easy and, for a time, Stanley angrily gives up. But they persevere and he finally achieves literacy.

Before he could read, Stanley spent his leisure hours making gadgets out of scrap parts, and one of them results in his being hired by a Detroit manufacturer. He comes back from Detroit a changed man and, confident in his new executive career, asks Iris to marry him.

Directed by Martin Ritt and written by Harriet Frank Jr. and Irving Ravetch — the same team who made "Norma Rae," the 1979 Oscar-winner about a labor organizer in a textile mill — the movie is a work of social consciousness, accurately depicting the financial constraints and limited horizons of its working-class characters.

This consciousness, however, serves only as background to the narrative's concentration on the down-to-earth but intriguing characters at its center. Stanley tells Iris that the happiest time of his life was six days he spent alone at the bottom of the Grand Canyon. She counters that her idea of happiness is bright lights and lots of people.

The script carefully constructs these two opposite yet parallel personalities whose common bond is their good, sincere, honest nature.

Unfortunately, once Iris learns why Stanley is such a confirmed loner, the narrative goes flat and plods as she tutors him and he silently courts her.

Along the way, there are some beautiful sequences, especially in Chaliapin's dignified performance as Stanley's father who tries to find his niche in a crowded old people's home.

Less is made of Iris's hard-pressed sister and her husband, who is unemployed and



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Robert De Niro and Jane Fonda star as blue-collar workers in "Stanley & Iris," a heartwarming story of two middle-aged people who help each other.

apparently a womanizer.

The biggest complication occurs when Iris's daughter becomes pregnant, an event handled in two scenes. In the first Iris gives her youngster a lecture on maternal responsibility. In the second, Iris reflects her joy on becoming a grandmother.

Though the pregnancy is treated as a serious concern within the family circle, the daughter and her child receive scant attention from the filmmaker. Part of the movie's problem lies in its lack of development of more than its two principals.

Even if one is disappointed in the story's lack of dramatic high points, however, the movie succeeds as a vehicle for its two stars. De Niro gives a strong, interesting performance, principally through his ability to suggest the interior struggles and frustrations of a grown man who is ashamed that he cannot read. Fonda, in a much less demanding role, is pert, chipper and very likable.

Director Ritt resolutely disdains resorting to razzle-dazzle effects or sensa-

tionalism to hype the movie's box-office draw. Instead, he has crafted a loving, heartfelt work about plain, ordinary people whose resolute blue-collar values earn them a traditional Hollywood happy ending.

Sadly, that may be off-putting for some. The director intends to make an uplifting movie, but he does so in such an obvious way that one is constantly aware of the story's destination. Moviegoers who decide to take the journey, however, will find many funny incidents, some insights on the workaday world and ultimately a refreshing affirmation of the American Dream.

Because of its scant but meaningful treatment of an illegitimate birth and a few instances of incidental profanity, the U.S. Catholic Conference classification is A-II — adults and adolescents. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG-13 — parents are strongly cautioned that some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.

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