

Martin steals dull comedy; medical thriller 'flatlines'

NEW YORK (CNS) — A mildly entertaining movie, "My Blue Heaven" (Warner Bros.) explores whether tough New York hood Vinnie (Steve Martin) can find happiness with his new identity as a wholesome California suburbanite.

After Vinnie turns mob informant, the witness-protection program relocates him to an idyllic community, where he is instantly stifled by the sunshine and sweetness all around him.

The only people he knows are Barney (Rick Moranis), the uptight FBI agent assigned to protect him, and Hannah (Joan Cusack), the assistant district attorney who furiously crosses his path whenever Vinnie steals a car for old time's sake.

Under Vinnie's irrepressible influence, Barney is soon wearing iridescent suits, dancing the merengue and romancing Hannah. For his part Vinnie keeps busy as a bigamist, trigamist and protagonist in a scheme to put other ex-crooks back in business.

But Barney and Hannah effect their own influence on Vinnie — and the local little league becomes the beneficiary of Vinnie's newly directed energies.

Martin really carries the ball in this minor league comedy from director Herbert Ross.

Always a very physical comedian, Martin is hilarious swaggering around in his punk haircut and cranberry iridescent suit, mouthing off in his heavy Brooklyn accent to the laid-back Californians.

Barney's transformation from nerd to hip G-man is best when Vinnie lures him to a disco for a madcap merengue, a funny scene which is less successful later in the film when Barney and Hannah are the more conventional dancing partners.

Though lacking a certain sharpness that would lift it beyond the bland, "My Blue Heaven" occasionally reaches stellar heights and Martin fans will enjoy the latest crazy character he captures so adroitly.

Due to cartoon-style shootouts, comic treatment of theft and bigamy and an instance of rough language, 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.

'Flatliners'

NEW YORK (CNS) — Four medical students presume to explore life after death with harrowing results in "Flatliners" (Columbia).

Ambitious medical student Nelson (Kiefer Sutherland) persuades four of his



Mafia informant Vinnie Antonelli (Steve Martin, right) becomes pals with Barney Coopersmith (Rick Moranis), the FBI agent assigned to protect him, in the Warner Bros. comedy, "My Blue Heaven."

fellow students (Julia Roberts, Kevin Bacon, William Baldwin and Oliver Platt) to assist him in a secret experiment which will "flatline" him — stop his life functions momentarily to experience what lies beyond — and then be revived by their combined medical intervention.

After they pull off the risky procedure, Nelson experiences bucolic visions of fields and flowers amidst childhood playmates, but neglects to tell them about some vaguely ominous images. Each then clamors to be next, even daring to stay under longer, unaware that now Nelson is being physically attacked by a terrifying figure from his near-death experience.

Disastrous aftereffects also befall the others. Joe (Baldwin), who has covertly videotaped his many sexual liaisons, begins to see the shameful replays on screens everywhere, and Rachel (Roberts) is haunted by guilty visions of her father, who committed suicide.

David (Bacon), who is also suffering hallucinations, concludes they are being punished for former misdeeds and decides to make amends. But Nelson has already taken the suicidal action of flatlining alone in hopes of righting his past sins, and in a frantic conclusion the students rush to him in a last-ditch attempt to bring him back alive.

Director Joel Schumacher has taken the age-old question of what happens after death and turned it into a pretentious horror movie that trivializes the question of near-death experiences.

This is where the film starts unraveling. It begins with one student's impassioned statement that religion and philosophy have failed and so it's up to science to discover what lies beyond the grave. But when those who have been wronged — mostly from childhood experiences — arise to taunt or attack those who have flatlined, the students do an about-face, deciding they have indeed challenged God's prerogative and are being punished by having their youthful transgressions return to destroy them.

The characters, however, are generally unsympathetic. Roberts, who was so popular with audiences earlier this year in "Pretty Woman," here portrays an intense young scientist determined to keep her emotions firmly under control. Bacon's passion for practicing medicine on his terms is only matched by Sutherland's arrogance as the fame-seeking group leader.

While the cinematography and settings are visually interesting and the plotline initially suspenseful, it all becomes so much mumbo-jumbo as choppy editing jars the viewer from reality to fantasy with long-dead figures within hallucinations coming alive to attack the students.

By the time it reaches its frenetic climax, "Flatliners" has itself flatlined.

Due to rationalization of suicidal behavior, depictions of promiscuity, sporadic violence and some rough language, the USCC classification is O — morally offensive. The MPAA rating is R — restricted.

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