

Too many characters burden Nicholson film

NEW YORK (CNS) — In the much-delayed sequel to the 1974 film "Chinatown," Jack Nicholson again limes the role of Jake Gittes, Los Angeles private eye, in "The Two Jakes" (Paramount).

It's 1948, southern California is poised on the edge of the post-war real estate boom and Jake has just taken on another routine case of documenting infidelity for his client, Jake Berman (Harvey Keitel), a San Fernando Valley land developer.

When the two confront the wife (Meg Tilly) and her lover in a motel room, Berman shoots his rival and Jake gets a nasty surprise — Berman never told him the man was his business partner and the surviving partner inherits all the assets.

The dead man's wife (Madeleine Stowe) starts breathing lawsuits down Jake's neck and he has to find out fast if the seemingly impromptu killing was actually premeditated murder. He thus refuses to turn over the recording of the lovers' motel conversation in the motel room until he uncovers the link between it and a disastrous case he handled 11 years earlier in Chinatown, when corruption in high places threatened the future of L.A.'s water supply and Jake's client ended up dead.

Trapped between hostile policemen demanding the recording and Berman's mob pals who take stronger action to get it, Jake discovers the real motives for the killing have far-reaching implications for the area's future.

Wearing two hats — star and director — Nicholson's sequel is ripe with atmosphere, lush visuals and crafty performances, but it is severely undermined by the narrative.

The script is so dense with plot intricacies that Nicholson's character is regularly heard via an explanatory voice-over to help sort the story out. Mostly it's a case of trailing the older and heavier Jake Gittes around L.A.

One exception is the frightening scene when Jake graphically humiliates the investigating cop (David Keith) for taunting him about his earlier failure.

The film's most obvious flaw is the overabundance of characters — the viewer is expected to keep track of approximately two dozen in order to follow the plot's complications. This makes it very difficult to care much about individual characters — a cornerstone in holding interest in a two-hours-plus film.

Nonetheless, the craggy dialogue is sometimes memorable and the low-keyed



"The Two Jakes" stars Jack Nicholson as detective Jake Gittes, the character he originated in "Chinatown." Nicholson also directed the Paramount mystery set in 1940s-era Los Angeles. The Motion Picture Association of America rated the movie R — restricted.

performances by the jaded Nicholson and the secretive Keitel are intriguing. The costumes and jewelry have an authentic 1940s look, and the darkly lit interiors are in nice contrast to the golden yet faintly disturbing outdoor scenes, where the point is made that "the oil rigs are already beginning to outnumber the palm trees."

"Chinatown" succeeded in telling a personal story while also evoking the widespread political corruption that was its genesis, but when "The Two Jakes" tries to get beyond an isolated case of adultery by tying in remnants of the "Chinatown" case plus the societal changes of a decade later, the movie sinks under its own weight.

Because of sporadic violence, restrained sexual activity and occasional rough language, the U.S. Catholic Conference classification is A-III — adults. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R — restricted.

Pair's comic chemistry livens 'Business'

Complications arise for a workaholic executive when an easygoing escaped con assumes his identity in "Taking Care of Business" (Hollywood Pictures).

After hightailing it out of prison so he can take advantage of World Series tickets he has won, Jimmy (James Belushi), a free-spirited car thief, stumbles upon the appointment book of harried adman Spencer (Charles Grodin), newly arrived in Los Angeles to land a career-making deal.

The date book is filled with credit cards, the keys to an oceanside mansion owned by Spencer's boss and the promise of a \$1,000 reward to the finder.

Upon arriving at the mansion to claim the reward, Jimmy is mistaken for Spencer by the boss's daughter (Loryn Locklin) and he plays along in hopes of getting to know her better — a lot better. He's also expected to land an account with a traditional Japanese client (Mako), who is startled by "Spencer's" less-than-businesslike behavior.

The real Spencer, meanwhile, has been mugged and is forced to accept the lecherous attentions of a former schoolmate (Anne DeSalvo) as he desperately tries to catch up with his client and discredit his looney imposter.

When Jimmy and Spencer finally collide, they hatch an even nuttier plan to salvage both their futures, and in the process gain an unexpected mutual respect.

Director Arthur Hiller's sturdy little comedy is nothing exceptional except that it's got two natural comedic talents in Belushi and Grodin, who are easily able to outshine the mediocre script.

DeSalvo is also wonderful as Spencer's man-hungry ex-classmate, bringing such soulful longing to her role she gets well beyond the caricature she could have been.

Belushi especially projects such irresistible charm and warmth that you don't care that his actions are very predictable — you're along for the ride and he's fun to watch.

As the high-powered exec forced to skulk around in female harem pants and a stolen sweatshirt, Grodin is pathetically comical, and once joined with Belushi, their chemistry is what makes an otherwise bland comedy a generally enjoyable experience.

Because of a brief sexual encounter, a flash of nudity, minimal rough language and brief scenes of comically treated violence, the USCC classification is A-III — adults. The MPAA rating is R — restricted.



Sidney Baldwin/Hollywood Pictures Company
When carefree prisoner Jimmy Dworski (James Belushi, right) finds the lost datebook/organizer of advertising executive Spencer Barnes (Charles Grodin, left), he suddenly finds himself leading the good life after being mistaken for Barnes in the comedy "Taking Care of Business."

'Darkman' emphasizes gory, grisly scenes

The mad scientist meets the phantom of the opera in the title character of "Darkman" (Universal).

The story concerns a scientist (Liam Neeson) who is dipped in acid and left for dead when hit men invade his lab to retrieve an incriminating memo that his girlfriend (Frances McDormand) intends to use against a crooked land developer.

Hideously disfigured, the doctor survives and plots his revenge. He goes into hiding to perfect his creation of synthetic skin so he can assume new identities and, under cover of night, stalk his victims. Darkman is born.

Writer-director Sam Raimi has crafted a somewhat stylish action thriller but gets

carried away with violence.

The visually interesting Gothic sets, atmospheric cinematography and taut editing serve only as a backdrop to the film's real emphasis — a parade of gory and grisly scenes where people are humiliated, tortured and killed by any number of graphic means. One bad guy even displays his collection of severed fingers in a plush velvet box.

Justice is not served by the doctor's vigilante tactics and the movie's emphasis on murderous revenge is far from wholesome.

Due to frequent excessive violence and some rough language, the USCC classification is O — morally offensive. The MPAA rating is R — restricted.