

Movie depicts love, control

Gerard J. Hekker/CNS

NEW YORK — "White Oleander" (Warner Bros.) is the sad, agonizing story of the trials of a teenage daughter whose single mother, Ingrid Magnusson, has been jailed for killing her boyfriend. The 15-year-old, Astrid (Alison Lohman), who journeys to adulthood through a series of Los Angeles foster homes, has witnessed her mother's (Michelle Pfeiffer) arrest for the killing, for which she is given a 35-year-to-life sentence.

Astrid's first foster home is with former substance abuser and born-again-Christian Starr (Robin Wright Penn), who leads Astrid to baptism, but later turns violently against her when she realizes her live-in boyfriend (Cole Hauser) and Astrid have become an item.

This rejection sets the pattern for Astrid's existence. The next stop is a group foster home where Astrid is the object of a gang beating. Fellow foster-home resident Paul (Patrick Fugit) saves Astrid from complete emotional isolation because each has a similar interest in drawing, which leads to romantic involvement.

The final foster mother is childless actress Claire (Renee Zellweger), whose TV executive husband (Noah Wyle) spends long periods of time away from home on business. They live in a stunning Malibu home overlooking the Pacific where Claire provides Astrid with her own bedroom and, more importantly, genuine affection and love.

A key feature of the film is the periodic visits Astrid makes to her mother in prison, usually after



CNS photo from Warner Bros.

Noah Wyle and Renee Zellweger play a childless couple who take in a foster daughter whose mother is in prison for murder in "White Oleander."

Astrid has been moved to a new location. During these times, Astrid tells her mother of the new people she lives with and her fascination with their lifestyles. Ingrid always fiercely insists that her daughter remember only what she has taught her and scorns her interest in Christianity, her sensitive boyfriend Paul, and Claire's caring tenderness. Instead, Ingrid bitterly disparages love, men and any traditional values that get in the way of self-interest.

As directed by Peter Kominsky, all of the actors are of top quality. Naturally, the success of the movie hinges on Lohman and Pfeiffer, and Lohman's portrayal of her arduous journey to adulthood is truly skillful. While Pfeiffer is basically limited to one locale, she presents herself to

Astrid as a truly interested mother who is ready to protect her daughter no matter the cost. But Astrid eventually realizes her mother's unrepentant selfishness and her controlling brand of love are as damaging as a white oleander is poisonous.

Because of some violence including a suicide, one instance of rough language, brief substance abuse and implied sexual encounters, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops classification is A-IV — adults, with reservations. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG-13 — parents are strongly cautioned. Some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.

Hekker is a guest reviewer for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Office for Film and Broadcasting.

Film capsules

NEW YORK (CNS) — The following are capsule reviews of movies recently reviewed by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Office for Film and Broadcasting.

'FORMULA 51'

Crass combination of pulp-crime potboiler and screwball comedy in which a greedy American chemist (Samuel L. Jackson) in England is caught in a web of double-crosses over his formula for a blue concoction promising unparalleled ecstasy. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops classification is O — morally offensive. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R — restricted.

'RED DRAGON'

Chilling tale of an ex-FBI profiler (Edward Norton) who risks using calculated tips from imprisoned murderer "Hannibal the Cannibal" Lecter (Anthony Hopkins) to hunt down a serial killer (Ralph Fiennes). A prequel to 1991's "The Silence of the Lambs" and remake of 1986's "Manhunter," director Brett Ratner's ice-cold thriller is anchored by Norton's finely nuanced performance but its methodical pace at times undermines suspense. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops classification is A-IV — adults, with reservations. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R — restricted.

GENERAL

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