

A Private Function

Directed by Malcolm Mowbray; screenplay by Alan Bennett; story by Bennett and Mowbray; with Michael Palin, Maggie Smith and Denholm Elliot.

Malcolm Mowbray's *A Private Function*, a very British comedy of food rationing after WWII, is a film that reaches for more than it can pull off. It begins with two stories—one features Michael Palin as the middle class chiropodist Gilbert Chilvers with a class conscious wife Joyce (Maggie Smith) and her senile mother. The other examines the high society dealings of the rich Dr. Swaby (Denholm Elliot) and his upper-class cronies. Gilbert is a gentle man who only wants to open his surgery on the parade so he can expand his clientele and give his wife the luxuries she craves. Swaby is caught up in the plans for a private function in celebration of Queen Elizabeth's wedding, but finds the time to thwart Gilbert's enterprise. Swaby hates the less privileged classes, especially the meek like Gilbert, and venally goes out of his way to make life miserable for them.

Gilbert decides he's had enough and chooses to enter into his own dirty dealings. He discovers the existence of an unregistered pig



REVIEW

and, as his family has been cheated out of its rations for some time by crooked butchers and black market dealings, he decides to steal it. Little does he know that Swaby and his friends have specially arranged for that pig to be served at their function. Gilbert and Joyce try to hide the pig (which is suffering from diarrhea) until he can find the nerve to kill it or Swaby strives to locate the rare swine. A confrontation is inevitable.

Mowbray seems to be banking on his stars, who worked so well together in the Palin scripted *The Missionary*, but neither the humor nor the characters reach the level that that film set. There is a very cynical slant to the British flavor of Mowbray's picture, but the point isn't very clear. Obviously Swaby is horrible and nasty and Gilbert is sweet and nice. Their parallel stories are destined to intertwine and the conclusion is a curiously interesting one, in the vein of *Prizzi's Honor* but without

the consistency or insight of John Huston's vision. Gilbert's character is slighted in the end; it isn't his fate that I bemoan but the filmmaker's lack of attention to it. He is the focal point of the film but is forgotten in the end except for a cute epilogue that really is nothing but a humorous addendum.

Even more inconsistent is the humor, sometimes screamingly funny, sometimes dead. Mowbray clumsily puts together his gags, blunting the comedy and working against his performers' pacing, and arbitrarily ends a number of sequences. Yet a few memorable scenes make it through. Michael Palin and Maggie Smith both shine in their roles, and their scenes together work well. The best bit occurs when the pig escapes from the kitchen and wanders into the living room, followed by mother. Palin and Smith react perfectly while the notoriously honest meat inspector (who happens to be in their living room) goes on unaware.

A good comedy, however, is more than a bunch of funny gags and Mowbray obviously tries to make this a wry comment on class difference and human nature. Unfortunately, he fails to develop any of his characters or situations well enough to justify his cynical ending. *A Private Function* is a good idea but poorly executed.

—Sean Axmaker

NOW SHOWING

Back to the Future: A boy trips back to the past, and meets the teenagers who'll become his parents. West 11th (342-4142) and Springfield Quad (726-9073).

Beverly Hills Cop: Eddie Murphy is a Detroit cop who comes to Beverly Hills to solve the murder of his best friend. Directed by Martin Brest (*Going in Style*). Shows with *Trading Places*. Fine Arts (747-2201).

Black Cauldron: Sword and sorcery stuff from Disney's animation studio. It's been a long time, Walt. West 11th (342-4142) and Springfield Quad (726-9073).

Cocoon: Old people become young again through contact with benevolent aliens. Stars Maureen Stapleton (*Reds*), Hume Cronyn (*World According to Garp*), Don Ameche and Jessica Tandy. Directed by Ron Howard (*Splash*). National (344-3431).

D.A.R.Y.L.: Adventure. A young boy who is part computer has amnesia and drifts into the arms of a foster family. He can't remember what happened and the government is after him. Shows with *The Goonies* at Oakway (342-5351).

Emerald Forest: Cultures collide as a man searches the Amazon jungle for his long lost son. Based on a true story. Directed by John Boorman (*Excalibur*, *Deliverance*). McDonald (344-4343).

Enormous Changes at the Last Minute: The lives of three New York women are portrayed with humor and feeling. Based on stories by Grace Paley. Cinema 7 (687-0733).

E.T.: Steve Spielberg's lovable, mega-money-making alien finds a temporary home in suburban America. Showing at Springfield Quad (726-9073) and Valley River Twin (686-8633).

The Goonies: Steven Spielberg produced this exciting adventure for young adults about a group of kids searching for treasure who must outwit the bandits and bank robbers to reach the climactic happy ending. Shot in Astoria, OR. Directed by Ric Donner (*Omen*, *Superman*). With D.A.R.Y.L. at Oakway (342-5351).

The Heavenly Kid: A 60's teen-angel helps out an 80's teen-ager. Cinema World (342-6536).

Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome: This is Mel Gibson's third fling as Australia's postapocalyptic hero. Eternal rock star Tina Turner provides the challenge. Be ready for lots of violent action. Valley River Twin (686-8633) and Springfield Quad (726-9073).

The Man With One Red Shoe: Tom Hanks plays an innocent man who is mistaken for a spy. Also stars Dabney Coleman. Based on the French comedy *The Tall Blonde Man with One Black Shoe*. Cinema World (342-6536).

National Lampoon's European Vacation: Chevy Chase takes his family for another trip. Sequel to *Vacation*. West 11th (342-4142).

Pale Rider: Clint Eastwood rides again. Shows at Cinema World (342-6536).

A Private Function: It's post WWII England with strict rationing in effect, and several villagers have cause for a little celebration. At the center of attention is a black market pig... with diarrhea. With Maggie Smith and Michael Palin, of Monty Python. Bijou (686-2458).

Rambo—First Blood Part II: If you liked *Code of Silence*, you'll love *Rambo*. This film picks up where *First Blood* left off—that is, with Sylvester Stallone in prison for shooting apart a whole town. The government hires Rambo to go to Vietnam and get proof of POW's. Mayflower (345-1022).

The Rocky Horror Picture Show: The King of the kinky cult musicals plays Eugene for the umpteenth time. Late show through Saturday at the Bijou (686-2458).

Silverado: A real Western, for Pete's sake, with touches of humor and tenderness. Written and directed by Lawrence Kasdan (*The Big Chill*), and featuring a fine cast. At Cinema World (342-6536).

Trading Places: Dan Akroyd plays a stuffed shirt stock broker. Eddie Murphy is the down-and-out street hustler. Their roles are reversed by two eccentric billionaires trying to settle an argument. Shows with *Beverly Hills Cop* at Fine Arts (747-2201).

—Michael Sussman

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