

Beautifully filmed, but story is shallow

Review by Lois Wadsworth

Good Morning Babylon

Italian film directors Paolo and Vittorio Taviani's "American fable" is a tribute to the early days in Hollywood. The Taviani brothers have made many wonderful movies (Padre Padrone, The Night of the Shooting Stars, Kaos), but this isn't one of them.

Somewhere in the picturesque Italian countryside an exquisite Romanesque cathedral is being restored. The stern maestro (Omero Antonutti) directs his artisan sons during the dramatic unveiling. Andrea (Joaquim De Almeida) and Nicola (Vincent Spano) are the youngest, the most gifted, and the old man's favorites. When their autocratic father retires from his failing business, Andrea and Nicola leave to make their fortune in America.

Fortune is not forthcoming, however. Reduced to ranch work, the brothers despair. A chance encounter with a group of Italian craftsmen on their way to build the Italian pavilion at the San Francisco World's Fair temporarily gives them an opportunity to use their skills. From there they get to the set of director D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance* where their consummate abilities are eventually recognized.

On the Hollywood Red Car (described as L.A.'s first attempt at mass transit) the brothers meet and court aspiring actresses Mabel (Greta Scacchi) and Edna (Desiree Becker). The couples marry, and Griffith throws an elaborate wedding party attended by the Italian father. Maestro meets maestro in a ritualized verbal shoot-out.

The Taviani brothers have made *Good Morning Babylon* a very pretty picture, as all their films are, but a disappointment in some

important respects. Their homage to Griffith is worthy, as is recognizing the contributions of artists from all over the world to the art of Hollywood. Grounding Andrea and Nicola's story in this era offered possibilities that were not realized. Worse, the film is awkward. Audiences overlook stilted dialogue if the characterizations are strong (as in *Jean de Florette*, for example) but, alas, such is not the case. Actresses Scacchi and Becker are simply unable to read lines; Charles Dance's Griffith is bloodless, wimpy; and Antonutti's overbearing father-figure is out of step with American audience taste. However, Vincent Spano (who played The Shiek in John Sayles' *Baby, It's You*) gives an excellent performance, and we should see more of Portuguese actor Joaquim De Almeida. If the rest of the performances had been up to their standards, *Babylon* would have been a better picture.

I stayed interested in the story as long as the brothers' gift of craftsmanship (whether renewing cathedrals or making movies) was the core idea around which the other plot elements revolved. I checked out towards the end when the focus of the movie came to be the unexplained, deteriorating relationship between the brothers, but it disturbed me as well. It seemed misplaced, too broad a message at the wrong time.

Sorry, I wanted to like this movie a lot more than I was able to. No doubt, the Tavianis have learned from their American experience and will go back to making Italian movies, which they do very well.



Two immigrant brothers (Joaquim de Almeida and Vincent Spano) find wives (Desiree Becker and Greta Scacchi) and success in Hollywood in *Good Morning Babylon*, directed by Vittorio and Paolo Taviani.

now showing

NEW TO TOWN

Good Morning Babylon: Paolo and Vittorio Taviani (*Night of the Shooting Stars*) look at early movie days. Called a poem, a love song and a fable, through Oct. 29 at Cinema 7 (687-0733).

Nightflyers: A future group of humans seeks its extraterrestrial enemy. T.C. Blake directs, based on a George R.R. Martin book. Movieland (342-4142).

Prince of Darkness: A teacher tricks his graduate science students into a new project: Keep the Devil down below. John Carpenter wrote/directed. R. Cinema World (342-6536).

The Sicilian: A Michael Cimino-directed drama, based on a Mario (*The Godfather*) Puzo novel. With Christopher Lambert, Terence Stamp, Barbara Sukowa. Movieland (342-4142).

Slam Dance: Not about dancing. Tom Hulce, Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio and Harry Dean Stanton appear in this movie set in a mythical New Wave L.A. underworld. Wayne Wang (*Chan Is Missing*) directs. Movieland (342-4142).

Suspect: Cher (*Mask*, *Witches of Eastwick*) takes on another leading-lady role. Here she's a D.C. attorney representing a Vietnam vet in a murder case. Dennis Quaid (*The Big Easy*) plays a juror. Suspense. McDonald (344-4343).

Withnail and I: Bruce Robinson (Oscar nomination for writing *The Killing Fields*) directs this film of two buddies and their misadventures. "Seriously warped sense of humor," said the *L.A. Weekly* in naming it their July 3 "Pick of the Week." The Bijou (686-2458).

CONTINUING/RETURNING

La Bamba: Lou Diamond Phillips and Esai Morales star in this re-creation of the life of Richie Valens, a late-'50s rock star who died in a plane crash at the peak of his career. Los Lobos provides many of the musical numbers. Double feature with *The Pick-Up Artist* at Springfield Quad (726-9073).

The Big Easy: By-the-ways D.A. Ellen Barkin (*Buckaroo Banzai*) meets laid-back cop Dennis Quaid (*Innerspace*) on a murder case in New Orleans. Former *L.A. Weekly* pick-of-the-week. Late-night feature at the Bijou (686-2458).

Dirty Dancing: Being compared to *Saturday Night Fever* and *Flashdance*, this musical/romance takes place in 1963 in upstate New York. Young Jennifer Grey falls for older man Patrick Swayze. Movieland (342-4142).

Dragnet 1987: Dan Aykroyd portrays the nephew of "Just-the-Facts" Sergeant Friday, and Tom Hanks plays his side-kick, in a spoof of the TV series. Double feature with *Three O'Clock High* at Springfield Quad (726-9073).

Fatal Attraction: A one-night stand turns into a nightmare for a lawyer (Michael Douglas) and his family. Glenn Close plays the obsessed woman who pursues him. Thriller. Cinema World (342-6536).

Full Metal Jacket: The long-awaited Stanley (2001) Kubrick film, it never lets up revealing the mindlessness and brutality of war, climaxing at the 1968 Tet Offensive of the Vietnam War. Double feature with *Robocop* at Springfield Fine Arts (747-2201).

In the Mood: Patrick Dempsey plays "The Woo Woo Kid," a teenager who runs off with older women. A nostalgic comedy based on a true 1940's story. With Beverly D'Angelo and Talia Balsam. Cinema World (342-6536).

Like Father, Like Son: Teen-age live wire (Kirk Cameron of TV's *Growing Pains*) and his straight-laced dad (Dudley Moore) accidentally trade brain parts connected to intelligence and personality, but not memory. Confusion reigns. Comedy. Movieland (342-4142) and Springfield Quad (726-9073).

Matewan: Re-creates an ugly incident in the 1920's in coal country, at Matewan (pronounced mate-one), West Virginia. Striking coal miners clash with their bosses through immigrant and Black scabs. Chris Cooper plays a union organizer, John Sayles (*The Brother From Another Planet*) directs. Valley River Twin (686-8633).

The Pick-Up Artist: Molly Ringwald and Robert Downey play lovers' games in this teen flick. With Dennis Hopper. Double feature with *La Bamba* at Springfield Quad (726-9073).

The Princess Bride: Rob Reiner (*Stand By Me*) directed this fantasy based on William Goldman's popular book. True love will out—and villains have punch lines. Cinema World (342-6536).

The Principal: A very tough principal cracks down on a very nasty school. With James Belushi, Louis Gossett, Jr., and Rae Dawn Chong. Springfield Quad (726-9073).

Robocop: Sci-fi thriller about a cyborg employed to clean up on Detroit lowlife. With Peter Weller, it's graphically violent, satirizes TV newscasts, and is more than comix brought to life. Double feature with *Full Metal Jacket* at Springfield Fine Arts (747-2201).

Roxanne: Steve Martin, with the longest nose since Pinocchio, and Daryl Hannah star in a modern-day comedy based on the story of Cyrano de Bergerac. Late-night feature at the Bijou (686-2458).

Someone to Watch Over Me: Detective Tom Berenger (*Platoon*) is attracted to a well-to-do woman (Mimi Rogers) who witnesses a murder. Movieland (342-4142).

Stakeout: Emilio Estevez and Richard Dreyfuss are two undercover detectives. Comedy-adventure. Springfield Quad (726-9073).

Surrender: Artist Sally Fields falls for novelist Michael Caine. Romance. With Steve Guttenberg and Peter Boyle. Valley River Twin (686-8633).

Three O'Clock High: Casey Siemaszko plays a kid who sweats out the school day's end, when he has to face a bully. Double feature with *Dragnet 1987* at Springfield Quad (726-9073).

The Untouchables: Robert De Niro, Kevin Costner and Sean Connery revisit the Al Capone era of Chicago in the 1930s. Brian De Palma directs. The Bijou (686-2458).

Thursday, October 22 is the last showing for: *Devil in the Flesh*, *Jean de Florette*, *Angel Heart* and *The River's Edge* at the Bijou. Computer Animation Show at Cinema 7. Big To wn. Too Much and The Living Daylights/Superman IV double feature at Movieland. Caught at Cinema World. Movie bookings change quickly—call theater to verify listing.

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