

On Screen

THE WIZ starring Diana Ross, Michael Jackson, Nipsey Russell and Ted Ross; written by Joel Schumacher; directed by Sidney Lumet.

Get this: we're asked to accept thirty-some-year-old Diana Ross as a shy 24-year-old Harlem kindergarten teacher acting like a sappily naive 12-year-old. When it isn't embarrassing, it's ludicrous.

And them's the good points.

This film version of the hit Broadway play, besides proving that Diana Ross should not be allowed to choose her own roles (I offer the wretched *Mahogany* as further proof), is also a primo example of the Great American Way: if you can't make quality, kill 'em with quantity. There is too much of everything—vast sets to accommodate the zillion dancers (surely every black dancer west of Gibraltar is in this movie), outlandish costumes and loud, veerrrry loud music (but not loud enough to keep the woman next to me from falling asleep mid-movie). The tunes, except for the repeated-ad-nauseum "Ease on Down the Road," are forgettable, the lyrics unimpressive and repetitious. The production numbers—and there must have been dozens—go on and on. The movie goes on and on and on. It's ironic that what started out as a flashy black version of *The Wizard of Oz* should end up so squarely in the middle-class white ethic. Bigger Is Better. That's what comes of inflated budgets and Sidney Lumet and no sense of humor anywhere, except for one brief moment when a large apple appears over the New York skyline.

Michael Jackson, Nipsey Russell and Ted Ross, as the Scarecrow, Tin Man and Lion, respectively, consistently outclass Ms. Ross—but then we don't actually see their faces, for which relative anonymity they should be grateful. Ross merely cries at the slightest provocation and hugs her dog. Whatever possessed a mature woman to play a child's role? And she plays it so straight; her final going-home song is delivered *a la* Streisand, straight into the camera, tears streaming.

This witless *Wiz* will probably make as much noise at the box office as it does on screen; too bad, as this will only encourage others to make even bigger, louder efforts.

Judith Sims

PARADISE ALLEY starring Sylvester Stallone, Lee Canalito, and Armand Assante; written and directed by Stallone.

Another buddy movie. This time the buddies are three down-and-out brothers in Hells Kitchen, 1946: Stallone is Cosmo, a cheap cheat and hustler, ever ready to bet on his younger brother's brawn; Canalito is big dumb sweet Victor who just wants a houseboat in Jersey with his Chinese girlfriend Susan; and Assante plays Lenny, the limping, bitter war hero. Their ticket to fame and fortune? Victor's wrestling prowess, as showcased in a scabby nightclub-cum-arena, *Paradise Alley*.

It's time someone in Hollywood realized that Stallone can't write, direct or act. *Rocky* was a one-shot stroke of luck that Stallone keeps re-stroking in the vain hope of releasing another genii (he's now working on *Rocky Part II—Redemption*, my choice for Pretentious Title of the Year). But no genii appears here, just a disconnected, poorly written (but well-acted, by everyone except Stallone) collection of scenes that adds up to boooooor-



Assante, Canalito & Stallone: one more buddy movie.

dom. It's hard to fathom what Stallone had in mind; *Paradise Alley* certainly isn't a character study, since most of the characters change personality mid-film, and it's too manic-depressive for a mood piece. The final wrestling bout is gruesomely violent, but we all know Stallone movies have happy endings, so there is no suspense. There is no interest.

Women don't count for much in *Paradise Alley*: Annie the taxi dancer loves Lenny, who treats her like dirt; Bunchie the hooker loves Cosmo, who treats her like dirt; and Victor loves Susan, who does his laundry and reads to him from the dictionary. Singer Tom Waits is wasted (in more ways than one); Stallone's real-life manager Jeff Wald plays an appropriately sleazy dancehall manager; and everyone in this movie chain-smokes. Just watching it will give you lung cancer.

Paradise Alley was a "payoff" project for fledgling producers John F. Roach and Ronald A. Suppa, who had originally purchased a screenplay from Stallone several years ago. Stallone then sold a very similar screenplay to hotshot producers Chartoff and Winkler, which became the million-dollar baby, *Rocky*. This left Suppa and Roach poised for a lawsuit, until Stallone agreed to give them yet another screenplay—*Paradise Alley*. Were I Suppa or Roach, I'd still sue—charging breach of taste.

Judith Sims

SLOW DANCING IN THE BIG CITY, starring Paul Sorvino and Anne Ditchburn; written by Barra Grant; directed by John Avildsen.

This is a high-gloss heartstring operation obviously patterned after *Rocky*. John Avildsen, director of both pictures, counts again on engaging characterizations, tender sentiments and the salability of dreams of triumph. Given sufficient advertising push, *Slow Dancing* will turn that commercial formula into a multi-million dollar gross.

Instead of a prizefight, the central metaphor is a ballet performance. Can determined, lithe Sarah Gantz (Anne Ditch-

burn) make it through opening night at Lincoln Center despite an advanced case of neuro-fibro-something that threatens to end her career? Scriptwriter Barra Grant plants signposts: "It's your dance. When are you going to dance it?" "I don't care about pain. I care about dancing. It's my life."

Of course she makes it, thanks to her championship inner structure and the emerging love of Lou Friedlander (Paul Sorvino). Her curtain call is taken in his arms, because her legs give out instantly after the ballet's triumphant conclusion. Kleenex tissues are worth more than Cliff's Notes at this point.

Friedlander is a newspaperman, a columnist known and loved by all, a poet of the human interest feature who is also improbably poor. (Though Sarah is the *Rocky*, Friedlander is the focus; rubes won't buy tickets to a woman-centered movie.) He is cuddly and big-hearted. At the dawning of their romance, Sarah tells him he's a poet. He waits two heartbeats, wads up his face and replies, "You're beautiful."

Later, encouraging Sarah in her moment of doubt and pain, Lou says, "You're gonna make 'em feel like they can all jump like you and touch the sky."

Avildsen and Grant speak their own intentions in that line. *Casablanca* was a sentimental movie, too. But it was decorated with rich sub-plotting and several well-drawn minor characters. *Slow Dancing in the Big City* is closer to pure formula, a make-you-feel-good movie, a well-crafted sucker play.

Byron Laursen

MAGIC, starring Anthony Hopkins and Ann-Margret; written by William Goldman from his novel; directed by Richard Attenborough.

William Goldman reportedly received \$1 million plus a percentage for this screenplay, and before that he made quite a bundle from his best-selling novel of the same name.

There have been less talented writers who have made more money (the Robbins, Sheldon and Wallace coterie, for instance) but

Goldman is different: otherwise astute people think Goldman is good. They take him seriously and offer him millions in the naive hope that a Goldman screenplay is some guarantee of success. Many of them have been enormously successful, such as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *All the President's Men* (almost completely rewritten by Alvin Sargent) and, to a lesser extent, *Marathon Man* and *A Bridge Too Far*.

But *Magic* is a hokey, turgid melodrama that would have made a nice 30-minute *Twilight Zone* episode; expanded to two hours, even with the considerable presence of Hopkins, it becomes boring, silly and not at all suspenseful. You've heard the plot before: a neurotically timid magician/ventriloquist ends up "controlled" by his dummy, which leads to murder, of course. Ann-Margret plays Hopkins' former high school crush to whom he flees when faced with "success," as offered by stogey-wielding agent Burgess Meredith.

The trouble with Goldman's fancy rep is that his movies attract stars like these; if there were justice in this world, *Magic* would have a good B cast, maybe Robert Duvall and Sheree North, and it would startle us with low-budget quality. Instead we're given a puffed-up piece of flummery with supernatural pretensions. The only magic here is in the size of Goldman's fee.

Judith Sims

WATERSHIP DOWN, director of animation, Tony Guy; written, produced and directed by Martin Rosen.

Straightaway, I confess I did not read *Watership Down*, Richard Adams' best-selling novel of a few years back. The animated film version, produced, written and directed in England by Martin Rosen for Nepenthe Productions, is a pure fantasy excursion, its themes freedom, loyalty and mortality. This is story-telling for its own sake, nepenthe to efface the world beyond the EXIT sign.

The animation of *Watership Down* is neither the herky-jerky, technically minimalist sort often seen in Japanese productions nor the chromatically simple Disney style. It seems the work of illustrators rather than cartoonists. The closest visual equivalents are found in children's books and magazine advertisements. Every green hillside is variegated with washes of gray, a tree is an interplay of colors, a moving stream is drawn in several shades of blue and gray-white.

The story is an epic journey. Allegory is mostly implicit, though *Watership Down* could be seen as the story of Everyman—or in this case, Everyrabbit—in an extraordinary situation. Hazel, the hero, convinced by the clairvoyant vision of Fiver, urges his community to abandon their warren. Joined by a handful of others, they escape the bulldozing of their world, but must cross wild and hostile territories to find safe ground. Once burrowed in, they must face danger again, this time to liberate some mates from the tyrannical General Woundwort, who looks surprisingly like John Huston in *Chinatown*. Along the way we have Art Garfunkel, whose voice is the aural equivalent of the film's visual style, singing "Bright Eyes"; a comically cranky, Lugosi-voiced seagull; and Cowslip, a withered effete whose warren is being systematically fattened and snared. The voices belong to British actors John Hurt and Michael Redgrave, among others.

Watership Down aspires to be a children's film with an adult audience. Actually, most adults will find it entertaining, prettily drawn and of slight content. Pre-teenagers are more likely to be enchanted by softly rendered birch forests, grassy hills and humanized bunnies.

Byron Laursen