



At the movies

Computer flick shorts out

I suppose "Electric Dreams" was the inevitable outgrowth of MTV. The film is slick, visually inventive and exciting — and practically void of substance.

Directed by MTV alumni Steve Barron (most notably Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean" video), "Electric Dreams" is a self-professed fairy tale for computers. Miles Harding (Lenny Von Dohlen) is an up-and-coming architect in an electric world. His best friend tells him he needs to get with it and get involved in the world of electric help, so he buys himself a home computer.

In one night Miles connects his entire home to his new toy and is ready to enter the world of electronic surveillance. But in his enthusiasm he overloads the system by trying to feed his office master computer into his dinky home model. To make matters worse, he spills champagne on it and shorts it out, or so he thinks.

Meanwhile, Miles finds himself with a new neighbor, a lovely young cellist named Madeline (Virginia Madsen). Miles is taken with Madeline immediately but, being once again late for work, he is forced to rush by her.

In Miles' absence, however, the unexplainably reactivated computer inadvertently woos Madeline by playing musical accompaniment to her cello practicing.

This situation sets the stage for a gentle romance between the shy, nerdish Miles and outgoing, aggressive Madeline, all while the computer (who we learn later is named Edgar) develops a personality and rudimentary emotions. The inevitable conflict comes when Edgar, who now speaks with the wonderfully expressive voice of Bud Cort, comes to believe he, too, is in love with Madeline.

Using this simple romance premise as a starting point, "Electric Dreams" seems perpetually on the verge of a real story. We see the glimpses of depth in scenes between Miles and Madeline, and even more promise in the relationship between Miles and Edgar. Edgar continually strives for communication and friendship with Miles, who remains cool to the idea of treating Edgar as the sentient being he is.

Unfortunately, none of the scenes reach their potential. It feels like the development that this story cries for was left on the cutting room floor to streamline the picture to just over 90 minutes. A prime example is the inclusion of Maxwell Caulfield, a completely extraneous character who is introduced at the outset as a prospective suitor to Madeline, yet probably has less than twenty lines and is all but forgotten by the end.

Director Barron has sadly allowed style to reign in this production at the expense of the story. Though the screenplay by Rusty Lemorande is quite simple in itself, Barron's direction does nothing to develop it. If anything, the story becomes less meaningful.

Barron uses a slick, complex production style utilizing tracking shots and variable set-ups. This method is intricately edited into a fast-paced, frenzied pattern and the end results are visually quite exciting. Yet he misses out on something in the process.

Complex, fast-paced, intricate editing should be used to convey something — excitement, tension, or most importantly, meaning. Barron uses it simply as a tool for choreography (the other tool being the camera). He literally makes the stationary computer dance in some scenes with his zooms, pans and cuts, but he never allows the style to offer anything else.

"Electric Dreams" is less a story than a celebration of superficial style and pop music, which is too bad because the story has promise. As it is, it's a fairly entertaining show with most of the life coming out of Bud Cort's performance as the voice of Edgar.

As fantasy, the script is functional and the direction, if nothing else, is interesting, but the film is ultimately lacking. The relationships are short-changed for the sake of style, and that isn't how it's supposed to work.

An experienced director harnesses style to serve content and meaning. Barron uses it as a replacement.

"Electric Dreams" plays at West 11th Tri-Cinema and Eugene Drive-In. Rated PG.

By Sean Axmaker

M. Doonesbury ends retirement

Good news kiddies, Zonker Harris is coming back.

The world champion tanner and the rest of the Doonesbury characters are due back September 31. They will appear in the Oregon Daily Emerald beginning October 1.

The strips creator, Garry Trudeau, is returning to work after a sabbatical that began January, 1983. But it was also a sabbatical for his characters, who have matured somewhat since they last appeared on the funny pages of 726 newspapers.



Graphic courtesy of Universal Press Syndicate



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"My characters are understandably confused and out of sorts," Trudeau said when he announced his sabbatical. "It's time to give them \$20 haircuts, graduate them and move them out into the larger world of grown-up concerns."

Trudeau, 35, started the strip in 1968 while still a student at Yale. He called it Bull Tales, but changed the name when it was nationally syndicated in October, 1970.

The return of the Pulitzer Prize winning comic strip may not be good news to everyone, especially the political leaders who have often been the target of Trudeau's satire.

But other political leaders have relied on the strip to help them make sense out of that fiasco called Washington, D.C. Former Pres. Gerald Ford read the strip to keep informed of the goings on in that city, and former California Gov. Jerry Brown once called Doonesbury "one of my key political advisers."

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