



At the movies

Kudos to Coppola for 'The Cotton Club'

Style has always been at the heart of Francis Coppola films. Recently it has too often come at the expense of the story. In "The Cotton Club" Coppola has a sprawling but solid foundation to show his stuff, and it looks great.

Pulling from both history and fiction, "The Cotton Club" chronicles a time of bootleggers and gangsters, flappers and tappers, jazz and gangland wars. A number of stories intertwine to

create this tapestry of spectacle and decadence.

The focus is on Richard Gere, who plays jazz cornetist Dixie Dwyer, an innocent bystander who inadvertently saves the life of psychotic mob-leader Dutch Schultz (James Remar). Dutch displays his gratitude by giving Dixie "the good life" against his will. Among his new "tasks" are to escort Vera Cicero (Diane Lane), Dutch's lover on the side, around town.

It's no surprise when romance blooms between the two.

In a subplot, Gregory and Maurice Hines play the tap-dancing Williams Brothers, an act trying to break into the Cotton Club. Delbert (Gregory), the more talented of the two, has higher aspirations of a solo career and hopes for a romance with the beautiful Lila Rose Oliver (Lonette McKee), a black singer who dreams of Broadway.

Numerous smaller vignettes play themselves out between these tales. Among the colorful personalities are the jovial Cotton Club owner Owney Madden (Britisher Bob Hoskins), his enormous bodyguard and friend Frenchy (Fred Gwynne), Dutch's rail-thin hit man Sol (Julian Beck), Dixie's younger brother Vincent (Nicholas Cage) and scores of other marvelous characters.

Coppola infuses this intriguing epic with expertly choreographed and brilliantly integrated song and dance spectacles, set largely in, where else? The Cotton Club.

Two worlds exist in stark contrast to each other — the flashy decadence found in the jazz

clubs, and the dark underside to the music and gaiety; the underworld executions and deals that are decided in the back tables. Dixie is caught between both and cannot free himself from either.

Granted, "The Cotton Club" isn't a perfect film. With such a rich mosaic to work from, Coppola's exuberance to showcase all the minor characters leaves Dixie and Vera sorely underdeveloped. Diane Lane compounds the problem with a lackluster performance as the

cynical flapper Vera. After a promising first few scenes, Lane somehow loses the life that defines her character.

All in all, Coppola is in top form as he puts this package together. Working with almost completely bravura performances, spectacular musical performances and alarmingly violent executions, the director draws the disparate elements together with masterful camerawork, editing and staging.

By Sean Axmaker



Courtesy photo

Diane Lane and Richard Gere star in Francis Coppola's most recent cinematic spectacle, "The Cotton Club."

'Flamingo Kid' a 'marvel'

When lanky, amiable Jeffery Willis (Matt Dillon) from lower-class Brooklyn runs smack dab into the bronzed "beautiful people" of the Long Island Club, El Flamingo, his values begin to shift.

When he becomes the eager protege of the club's girdled gin king, Phil Brody (Richard Crenna), a cutthroat businessman with the scruples of a confidence man, Jeffery contemplates a whole new future.

What begins as a summer job turns Jeffery Willis into "The Flamingo Kid."

Garry Marshall's wonderful tale of growing up is a sharp, incisive little piece that poignantly describes the alienation of an overreaching young man and his down-to-earth family.

Jeffery's plumber father Arthur, nicely underplayed by Hector Elizondo, is a proud, affectionate, loving man with an easy sense of humor and a strong sense of right.

Determined to give his children the education he never had, he and his son butt heads over Jeffery's decision to skip college and become a salesman. Spouting Brody's advice, Jeffery sounds cocky rather than resourceful, and a rift develops between he and his father.

Dillon gives the finest performance of his career as pleasantly awkward Jeffery. At all times charming and friendly, he pulls off stock scenes of the lower class kid bumbling through high society with understated humor.

Marshall creates a natural atmosphere of humor, unforced and affectionate. In an early scene Jeffery banters with his father after climbing under a sink to help him with a leaky pipe. At the conclusion they toss stilted metaphors between each other, trying to bridge the gap that has developed between them.

These trite cliches are so ridiculous that they themselves finally realize the silliness and open up to speak honestly. Marshall delves into the relationship between father and son to discover the love, pathos and natural humor of a real family.

A sore spot is Jeffery's girlfriend Carla, played by Janet Jones. At first a seemingly important character, she loses prominence and disappears without much impact. Her scenes with Dillon exhibit a fine rapport and a gentle romance, but a stronger development is needed.

Some elements do seem overlooked. For example, Brody begins coaching Jeffery in the fine art of playing gin in an early scene, but the logical extension is absent. When Jeffery later takes on Brody in the big game, are we to assume he's had no further coaching? It seems unlikely.

Yet this is a small oversight, and a forgivable one at that. Marshall's film is a fine, funny, engaging work that gently captures the pain of growing up. "The Flamingo Kid" is one of the surprising marvels of the Christmas Season.

By Sean Axmaker



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