

Cinematic adaptation fails to meet 'Expectations'

By Ashley Bach
Oregon Daily Emerald

The actors are beautiful, the photography magnificent and the artwork breathtaking in "Great Expectations," the most recent film adaptation of the Charles Dickens novel. Now if only the sum of the movie could equal the beauty of its parts.

This version, set in the present-day (most likely in order to be palatable to younger audiences), seemed very promising in previews. The producers rounded up two talented rising stars in Gwyneth Paltrow and Ethan Hawke to play the leads, and accompanied them with amazing veteran actors in the supporting roles. In addition, the film was directed by Alfonso Cuarón, whose last film was the beautifully rendered "A Little Princess."

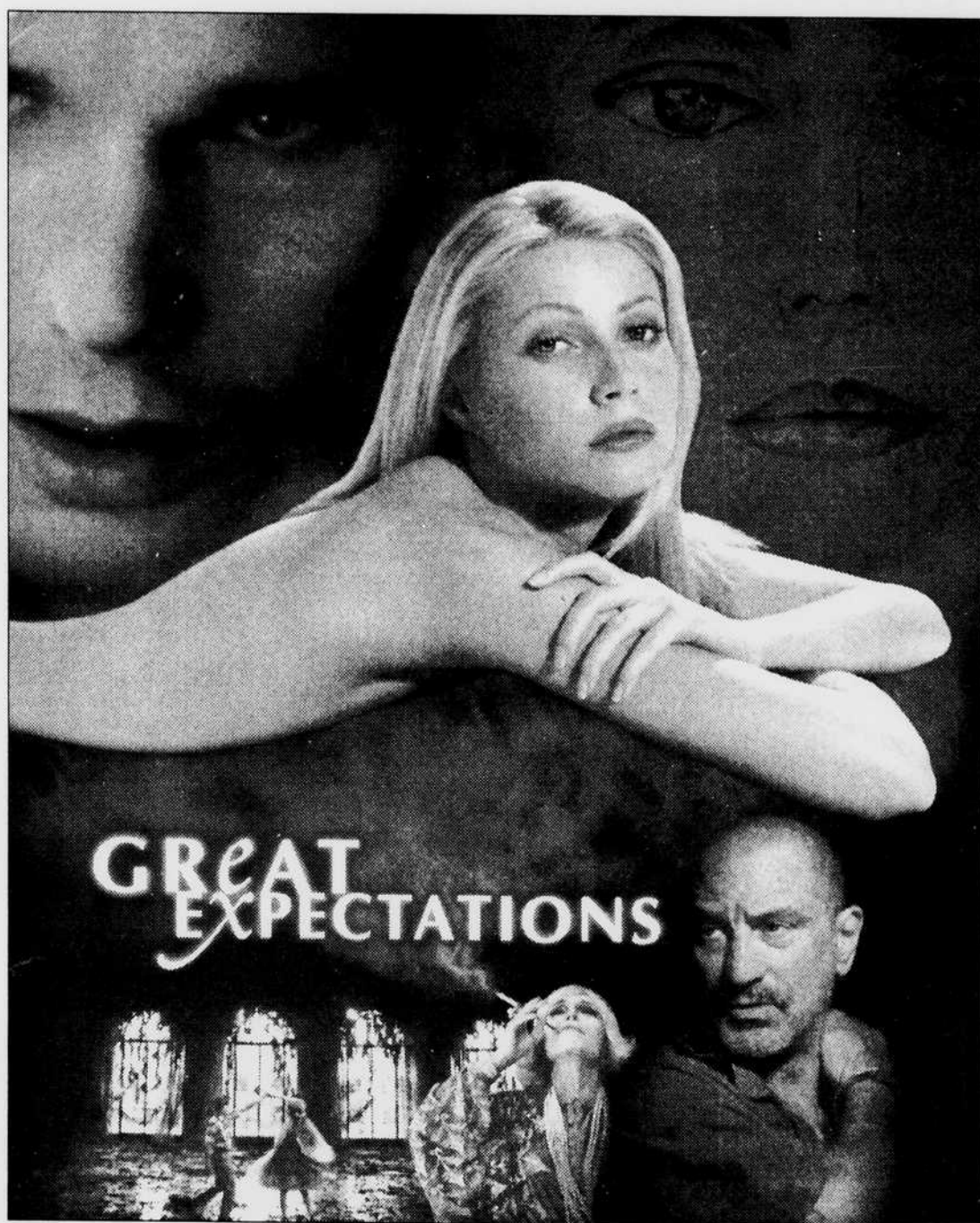
Unfortunately, the film stops just short of combining all these elements into a satisfying whole. For one, the story is "loosely based" on the novel, which in itself is an overstatement. The same principal characters, with mostly different names, exist along with some basic plot elements. But that's where the similarities end. The changes were no doubt meant to simplify an already complicated story. Instead, they muddle the narrative by fully exploring some characters, practically ignoring some and making up others.

The film opens on the Gulf Coast of Florida. Eight-year-old Finn Bell (Jeremy James Kissner) is navigating a small motorboat to a beach in order to sketch fish and other sea critters. As he stares fixated on his subjects, he is accosted by an escaped convict named Lustig (Robert De Niro). The convict demands that the boy help him, and he does, providing him with cutters to remove his leg-irons and helping him elude authorities.

The convict disappears, and we find that Finn, an orphan, is living with his sister and her husband, Joe, a fisherman (Chris Cooper). They are dirt-poor, but are fairly content to live by modest means. Then Finn is summoned to the estate of Nora Dinsmoor (Anne Bancroft), a rich old coot who lives in a dilapidated old mansion. Dinsmoor wants him to play with her niece, Estella (Raquel Beaudene), who lives with her.

Quickly, Finn falls in love with the older girl, who is 11 and quite precocious. She flirts with him, but ultimately treats him cruelly because of his social status. Soon, the two children have grown into teenagers (now played by Hawke and Paltrow), and they still meet every week at the old mansion. The crazy, embittered Dinsmoor makes them dance together and vicariously lives through their interaction.

Just as Finn and Estella's relationship is starting to pick up



Above are the film's primary actors: Ethan Hawke, Gwyneth Paltrow, Anne Bancroft and Robert De Niro.

steam, almost literally, she leaves for boarding school in New York and Paris. Finn eventually puts her in the back of her mind, gives up the painting and drawing he loves and works for Joe as a fisherman.

Soon, however, Finn's new life is interrupted by the appearance of a mysterious lawyer, who tells Finn he is endowed by his client to make "your dreams come true." Within a few days, Finn is off to New York with a huge apartment, a show in a prominent gallery for his paintings and a high-brow status he has never known, all funded by a secret benefactor.

There in the big city, he is reunited with Estella, and soon discovers that his expectations of his new life and who he really is may be entirely different.

The Florida scenes are great, with grand, moody photography, a

MOVIE REVIEW

Great Expectations

Directed by Alfonso Cuarón

- **GENRE:** Film adaptation
- **STARRING:** Ethan Hawke, Gwyneth Paltrow, Anne Bancroft, Robert De Niro
- **RATED:** R
- **SCORE:** ★★★★★

great score and a more subtle narrative. When the action moves to New York, and we find more of a focus on Estella and Finn, the story moves faster, accompanied by completely unnecessary modern rock hits. In the end, the feelings evoked seem a bit untrue, and sev-

eral plot lines have trouble converging into one climactic moment.

Hawke and Paltrow are both fine, although not spectacular, as the leads. Hawke is a capable actor, but he struts around with his chest puffed out so much that he seems to be trying to make up for his high voice and lack of machismo. De Niro is okay as Ludwig, and accurately portrays a weathered man with an unflinching spirit. But it is Bancroft, as the crazy Dinsmoor, who really lights up the screen. Her antics and mannerisms make Dinsmoor not only come alive, but also give the film a sense of humor and dynamo it sorely needs.

The film is a beautifully rendered tale devoid of any adequate unity in the narrative. If one is looking for a feast for the eyes, but not necessarily for the soul, go see "Great Expectations."

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