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'The Cooler' fails to satisfy with its boring characters

William H. Macy stars alongside Alec Baldwin in a film that ends feeling incomplete and tired

By Ryan Nyburg
Senior Pulse Reporter

Some films work like a Greek tragedy, following characters through their lives to an inevitable fate that seems willed by the gods but was actually brought upon the characters by their own failings. "The Cooler" is a tragedy of this kind, or at least it tries to be. But it doesn't have the courage to follow through with it, and on only a few points does it ring true. While enjoyable, the lack of a consistent tone leaves it flawed and purposeless.

MOVIE REVIEW

The film stars William H. Macy, one of the best character actors in cinema today, as Bernie Lootz. Bernie is a loser. The saddest aspects of his life are that he is aware of it, and that is his only real skill. His poor luck is infectious, spreading to those around him like a dark cloud. He's employed by Las Vegas-casino manager Shelly Kaplow (Alec Baldwin) as a "cooler," spreading his poor luck to the gamblers around him, making them lose and in turn making the casino profitable.

The problems start when Bernie meets Natalie (Maria Bello). When they fall in love, his luck begins to turn. However, his good luck turns out to be equally infectious and the casino patrons start winning in droves.

While this might all sound a bit absurd, it is to the film's credit that it never makes you question the legitimacy of Bernie's odd talent. Macy looks so run-down and pathetic that it is easy to believe he could make you lose three grand at blackjack just by standing next to you. But neither Macy nor the screenplay ever makes Bernie interesting



Courtesy

enough to occupy an entire movie. It often feels like he's existing in the background and is there only to be cheated, abused or pitied.

The character who does make an impression is Baldwin's casino manager. He makes Shelly the kind of tough guy who might have gotten his cues from watching "The Godfather" but actually has the muscle to back it up. Throughout the film he seems like a throwback to the old Las Vegas, a city built by gangsters and gamblers, before it was spruced up for the tourist trade and made to cater to vacationing families.

In essence, this is the film's major drawback. The central character seems diminutive in what is a minor role stretched to fill the entire movie, while one of the supporting characters exists with a purpose and a meaning. Shelly could fill a movie and make it interesting; Bernie can't.

As for the rest of the cast, they are functional without being interesting. Bello's Natalie is a worthy love interest and not much else. At times, her relationship with Bernie has flashes of honesty that might have given the film more weight had they been explored in depth. But unfortunately,

their relationship is taken as a given, and her character is left underdeveloped. Her past is mentioned but is not believable, and her interest in astrology feels more like a tacked on quirk than a real character trait.

"The Cooler" is not without its good points. Baldwin's performance could match his best work. The music and mood of the film all evoke a longing for a better — though admittedly more violent — time in Las Vegas' history. It's a theme that is developed to the point where there might have been a satisfying payoff for it, but that never happens.

The film's conclusion also doesn't hit the right note, and while Baldwin's character comes to an end that is fitting for him, Macy's and Bello's characters do not. Their fate does not feel honest and seems tacked on to provide a satisfying conclusion. But because it isn't honest it fails, leaving the film feeling incomplete. It seems like a waste of some good elements.

"The Cooler" opens next Friday at the Bijou Art Cinemas, located at 492 E. 13th Ave.

Contact the senior Pulse reporter at ryannyburg@dailyemerald.com.

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PULSE BRIEFS

Folk Festival applications must be received by Feb. 27

Performance applications for the 34th Annual Willamette Valley Folk Festival are now available at the UO Cultural Forum, located on the ground floor of the EMU.

Applications for the spring festival must include a musical sample or appropriate promotional materials for other performers. All applications must be received by Feb. 27.

Further questions can be directed to Folk Festival Co-ordinators William Reichman and Ariel Zimmer via e-mail at wreichsm@gladstone.uoregon.edu and arielzimmer@hotmail.com, or by phone at 346-0635.

Applications will also be available online at <http://culturalforum.uoregon.edu>.

— Aaron Shakra

Oregon Quarterly features new contest for students

The University magazine Oregon Quarterly is offering an essay contest for college students. The fifth "Northwest Perspectives" essay contest now features a category exclusively for students.

Oregon Quarterly editor Guy Maynard encourages student writers to take advantage of the opportunity.

"The contest functions as a forum, an outlet for writers and a way to find

people who might write for the magazine in the future," he said. "It also promotes the fact that the magazine addresses issues in the Northwest."

Student submissions must be non-fiction and include ideas that affect the Northwest. Topics of past winners in the general contest include a father/daughter relationship in Northwest culture, the relationship of firefighters to fire and how forest fires affect the region, and climbing a glacier as a metaphor for life changes.

The winner will receive \$250 and publication in the magazine, and the second-place winner will receive a \$75 gift certificate to the University Bookstore. Winners of the general and student contests will be featured at a public reading in May. Portland-based editor and essayist Brian Doyle will judge the entries and teach a writing workshop to the top five student finalists and top ten general finalists following the reading.

"The reading is a chance to celebrate people who work at writing without any near prospects of fame or fortune," Maynard said.

The deadline for entries is Jan. 31. For more detailed information about submissions, visit Oregon Quarterly's Web site at <http://www.uoregon.edu/~oq/index.htm>.

— Natasha Chilingirian

Monthly contest offers prizes to amateur photographers, poets

Nonprofessional photographers

and poets have the opportunity to enter monthly contests for a shot at publication and cash prizes of up to \$10,000. The International Open Amateur Photography and International Open Poetry Contests are open to all recreational photographers and poets in the United States.

Each month, a grand prize winner is selected in both photography and poetry categories for an award of \$1,000, and one photographer and one poet are selected for \$10,000 each year. Forty first-place winners are awarded \$35 for the photography contest, and 73 second-place winners are awarded a gift package with a value of \$25.

Twenty-four first place poets are also selected each month for a silver medal worth \$50, and 79 second place winners get a bronze medal worth \$25.

Photographers can choose to enter their pictures among the following categories: people, travel, pets, children, sports, nature, action, humor, portraiture or other.

The International Library of Photography and The International Library of Poetry, two organizations that publish photography and poetry books, sponsor the contest. All photography entries are considered for publication by The International Library of Photography.

For more information, visit <http://www.picture.com> for the photography contest and <http://www.poetry.com> for the poetry contest.

— Natasha Chilingirian

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