

MIDNIGHT IN THE GARDEN OF GOOD AND EVIL

Directed by Clint Eastwood
John Cusack, Kevin Spacey, The Lady Chablis

Maybe you read *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. I didn't. I avoided it because it looked like fiction, which I don't enjoy reading. "Oh, no, it's a true story!" devotees yell at me. Be that as it may, the movie is fiction.

Going into the theater, I expected history to be

Cinema

recreated. I assumed that John Kelso, the protagonist Yankee writer played by John Cusack, must've written the nonfiction book that documents a twisted, colorful and deadly lovers' quarrel. But the book was written by John Berendt. As a matter of fact, John Kelso is entirely fictitious. So while the movie may be based on actual events, it is fiction. As the story has taken on a life of its own via sensationalism, the distortion of historical perception is a foregone conclusion.

That's not to say it isn't very entertaining. The bulk of this country's good stories come from the South, and this is one more. Having spent a few years in Richmond, Va., the former capital of Dixie, I can attest that *Midnight* has captured a rich slice of New South Pie.

From the gun-toting alcoholism to the absurdly pampered ladies' bridge parties, audiences unfamiliar with the South might assume *Midnight* is a savory exaggeration, but it's not.

Filmed on location in Savannah, Ga., under Clint Eastwood's direction, the story falls short of the setting and characters. The plot is born of these true events: Jim Williams (Kevin Spacey), a gay Savannah bon-vivant, fatally shot his rough-trade lover, Billy Hanson (Jude Law), during the wee hours following Williams' annual anybody-who's-anybody Christmas party.

Was it self-defense? Did Hanson try to kill him first? Will Williams be shunned by Savannah high-life for letting his private life get out of hand and out of the closet?

While the book may have asked these questions, the movie moves in another direction. The questions are posed, but only as filler.

What keeps the screen version of *Midnight* fueled is *The Lady Chablis*, a female impersonator who was a character during the actual events, who plays herself in the movie and who steals the show. Having spent so much of her life playing a character, be it on stage or in her own kitchen, Chablis has an extra dimension that the other actors couldn't match. Watching Chablis was like watching a documentary. She is so comfortable, naturally ad-libbing lines—the genuine article.

Cusack was Cusack: running around with his mouth open looking surprised, mouth open look-



The Lady Chablis

ing scared, mouth pursed looking frustrated. It's such a tiny mouth, but he's made millions working it.

Spacey was Spacey, but his range extended a bit further than Cusack's. As a Southern prim and seemingly proper (nearly masculine) dandy, he was perfectly cast. So much so, that when he should be looking tortured, he still looks like he's having a good time in his role. Liken it to Harvey Corman playing Rhett Butler on *The Carol Burnett Show*.

The unsung star of *Midnight* is Minerva (Irma P. Hall), a spooky though endearing voodoo priestess. Minerva adds some spice, passing through scenes with her bones and talismans, her quasi-Cajun accent and cryptic warnings. Actually, it's Minerva's haunts and habits that give this story its priceless title.

Say a prayer that somehow she's made some money off it.

(Playing at area Act III Theatres.)

ALIEN RESURRECTION

Directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet
Sigourney Weaver, Winona Ryder, Ron Perlman

With an ample dose of terror, some movies in the *Alien* series might have you screaming for Mommy. In the case of *Alien Resurrection* you'd be wise to bite your tongue, considering this movie is full of all sorts of

maternal imagery, none of it very pleasant.

Resurrection presents a fourth opportunity for Warrant Officer Helen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) to repel green beasts. Actually, this episode's Ripley isn't quite the same character. Playing upon the current trepidation that surrounds genetic monkey business, scriptwriter Joss Whedon has penned Ripley as an inexact clone of the original Ripley, whose fiery demise is 200-year-old history relative to this new story.

Something both Ripley versions have in common is being dubbed "lesbian icon" by the *Advocate*. It's not a surprising title for Ripley to carry, as one of the first woman action heroes. She's nonsense, kicks a lot of ass (including potential rapists), and spends her time fighting demons who want to use her body for their own reproductive needs. And in film No. 4, there's plenty more where that came from.

Director Jean-Pierre Jeunet created a soulless creature if he was attempting to deliver an anti-science *Frankenstein* for the sheep-clone, frozen fertility '90s. Jeunet, who (with Marc Caro) gave us *Delicatessen* and *The City of Lost Children*, did manage to create a soul for *Resurrection* from what he knows best: unsettling dark tales that are slick, enchanting, ethereal and even comic, despite our best intentions not to laugh at what's gruesome.

Jeunet's picture is something that can frighten you, possibly move you and definitely make you cringe. It's all accomplished through mood and

imagery. Images of motherhood—beautiful, painful, grotesque, fluid, natural and not—are ever-present. There's a very female thread holding a great deal of this movie together.

While there may be more action than even *Aliens* delivered (depending on your definition), there's far less character development than in any of the previous *Alien* films.

Whedon possibly hoped to write a story that made a moral statement, something cerebral. Maybe not. Regardless, the dialogue was too god awful to deliver any such thing. Though it won't help, please reserve judgment till the very last scene wherein Ripley shares some unbelievably bad lines with Annalee Call (Winona Ryder).

Considering Ryder delivers most of her lines in a sort of Southern California dialect, she should've kept her mouth shut altogether. She looked perfect for the part of the morally superior, compassionate, pirate infiltrator. But after her powerful statements, I was on the edge of my seat waiting for the second shoe to fall: "There's not enough power to

go to critical mass! ... Heather!"

Despite the bad dialogue, despite Ryder's dialect, *Resurrection* is still very gripping. The gist of Whedon's story is powerfully disturbing, especially when no one speaks. The world created by Jeunet and director of photography Darius Khondji is captivating. Khondji's use of chiaroscuro lighting and other techniques, which he also employed in *Delicatessen* and *The City of Lost Children*, gave the frames a comic-book crispness.

Weaver's acting is as intense as ever. Ripley and Call share a lot of scenes together and Weaver carries them for the most part. Ryder is very good at looking scared, and that helps. She could not create an edge for Call that might've turned her into Ripley's sidekick instead of her adopted daughter, though. The effect was likely intentional directing from Jeunet, but it certainly didn't help develop an already mousy role.

Michael Wincott (*Basquiat*, *Strange Days*) looked great with his new cropped locks and plays a convincing pirate captain, but don't get too attached. After all, the script had to get its body count from somewhere. From *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* to *Child's Play*, Brad Dourif has been typecast as the weaselly-looking psychotic, and it happens again in *Resurrection*. He accepts his typecasting gracefully and gives some depth and creepy charm to one of the many mad scientists in the cast.

Ron Perlman (*The City of Lost Children*, *The*



Winona Ryder (left) and Sigourney Weaver

Last Supper) gets more lines than usual, but that's not saying much. The character Johnner could've been created for him; he wears it well. And sweet, goofy Dominique Pinon (*The City of Lost Children*, *Delicatessen*), as Vriess, is again sweet and goofy.

While mired in all the ill will that inhabits *Resurrection* you may well come to appreciate Pinon's goofy sweetness as never before. If you can't call for Mommy, call for Dominique.

(Playing at area theaters.)

Reviews by Will O'Bryan

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