

FILMS

ISN'T SHE GREAT

A cinematic biography of novelist Jacqueline Susann—who wrote *Valley of the Dolls*, the best-selling novel of all time—could be a number of things: a psychological look at Susann's desperate pursuit of fame as a panacea for her tragedy-plagued personal life, an abstract treatise on art vs. commerce, or even a simple American dream story.

Isn't She Great is none of the above. Instead, in the hands of director Andrew Bergman (*Striptease*), screenwriter Paul Rudnick (*In & Out*) and star Bette Midler, Susann's life is curiously transformed into a breezy, episodic comic bauble, funnier than most sitcoms, but with the same lack of depth.

In fact, the film is as simplistic and mindlessly entertaining as one of Susann's novels. We see nothing of her childhood or parents; the script mostly sticks to Susann's hunger for fame, her relationship with her manager-husband, Irving Mansfield (an oddly cast Nathan Lane), and her dubious concealment from the world of her mentally disabled son and her own terminal breast cancer.

Along for the ride is David Hyde Pierce as an uptight book editor whose task is to edit

and gender. These highbrow aspirations are waylaid by her unwarranted focus on the young woman's surprisingly irrelevant family. The bumbling father, hysterical mother and two brothers (one macho, one gay) seem to have wandered in from a different movie.

Though Campion occasionally conveys her ideas fluently—especially in the scene when Winslet's family gives her over to Keitel; and later, when Winslet titillatingly cajoles Keitel into cross dressing—she undoes herself by too frequently putting arch ideology, rather than real dialogue, into the characters' mouths. The film is simply not rigorous enough, visually or intellectually, to support such abstractions.

Despite its occasional brilliance and fine performances from Winslet and Keitel, *Holy Smoke* is, overall, a noble failure. It is scheduled to open this month at area theaters. —CM

THE THIRD MIRACLE

Playing Roxanne, a lost soul and daughter of a would-be saint, Anne Heche looks good as a redhead and even carries off the late '70s hippie-ethnic wardrobe. It's Ed Harris' job to investigate the worthiness of her dead mother's case for the Catholic Church.



Ed Harris (left) and Anne Heche in *The Third Miracle*

Valley of the Dolls, though he despises it. (Pierce plays his character as if he were still on television doing Niles Crane for *Frasier*.)

Midler's familiar screen persona is similar to Susann's own personality, and she doesn't stray far from it here. Cheerfully vulgar, gaudy and superficially outrageous, her performance will delight those who already enjoy her, but it's unlikely to win Midler any new fans.

Rudnick's script lamely glosses over any unpleasant or complicated aspects of Susann's life, including her crassness, the critical rejection of her writing, her many trials in marriage and motherhood, and her bisexuality. Her 1974 death seems incidental in this context and doesn't register emotionally.

Isn't She Great, now playing at area theaters, can only be heartily recommended for die-hard Bette Midler fans and those looking for very light comedy. Those seeking an exploration of the serious questions surrounding Jacqueline Susann's life and career are advised to look elsewhere. —Christopher McQuain

HOLY SMOKE

Jane Campion's *Holy Smoke* sounds like a fantastic idea on paper: The co-writer and director of *An Angel at My Table* and *The Piano* tells the story of a young woman (Kate Winslet) infatuated with Hinduism, her family's attempts to deprogram her, and her bizarre relationship with the specialist (Harvey Keitel) they hire to do the job.

So what went wrong? When the film does work, it's apparent that Campion intended to seriously probe issues like spirituality, trust, sex

Set in Chicago from 1979 to 1983, *The Third Miracle* is first and foremost a star turn for Harris, a priest experiencing a crisis of faith. While his character wonders "Where does faith go?" he plops, drunk and agonizing, into a friend's confessional. His friend replies: "This is first year seminary bull session stuff." To which he shouts back: "It had better be true—all of it." (Meaning God, heaven and all the other tenets of his faith. If he decides to give up his worldly life—and the love of Roxanne—for nothing, boy is he going to be pissed!)

Harris' priest has his own take on ethics, as he robs the candle money box to aid a young woman in need and proceeds with the investigation in his own unorthodox manner, which has him conducting cozy interviews with Roxanne, played by Heche with natural, not flashy assurance.

Roxanne is a skeptic and sees no reason why the woman who abandoned her should be made a saint. In true Hollywood fashion, Father Frank rescues Roxanne from the shambles she has made of her life, and she, in turn, does more or less the same for him. At one pivotal moment she confronts him: "Are you gonna spend your whole life caring more about a dead woman than a live woman?"

By the end of *The Third Miracle*, the padre has made his choice in this thoughtful meditation on faith that also takes a few jabs at the excesses of the Catholic patriarchy. The film is scheduled to open later this month at KOIN Cinemas. —Oriana Green

■ CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN is a Portland-based writer and tireless observer of pop culture.

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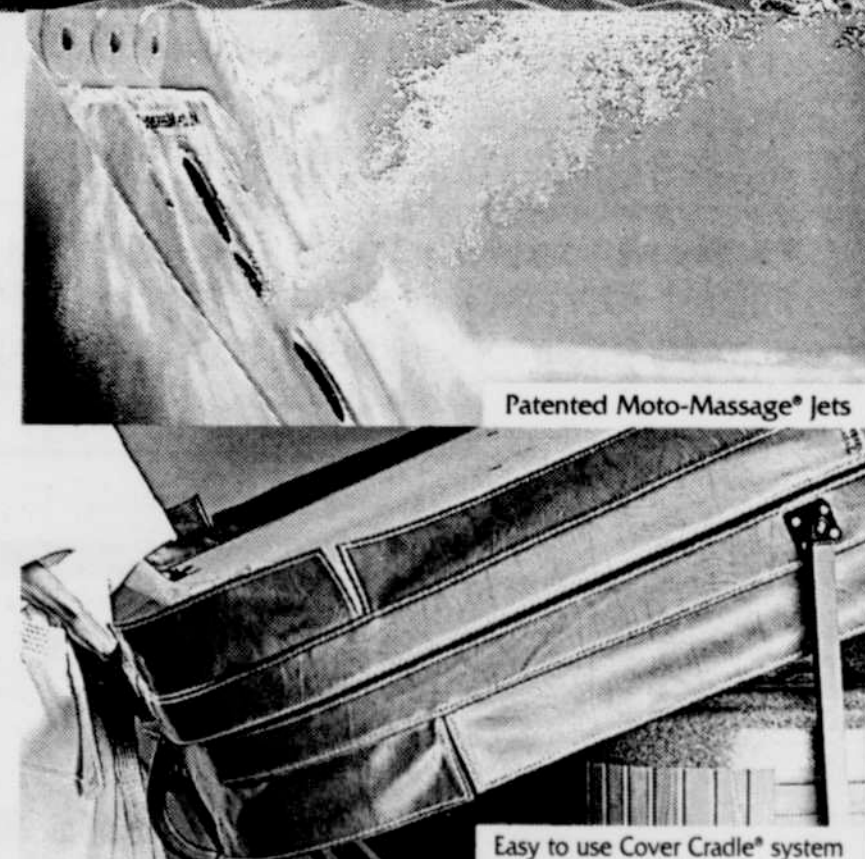
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