

BILOXI BLUES Starring Matthew Broderick and Christopher Walken. Directed by Mike Nichols. Rated mature. Now playing at the Granville, Oakridge, Dolphin, West Van Odeon, Scott 72, and Coquidam Cinemas.

Biloxi Blues is a case of lessons left unlearned. Halfway through this autobiographical Neil Simon movie, a hapless but profound army buddy tells Simon's alter ego, Eugene Jerome, "Once

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you start compromising your thoughts, you are a candidate for mediocrity."

Apparently Simon was capable of remembering that statement for several decades and writing it into a script without paying it any attention. Like so many movies based on Neil Simon plays, *Biloxi Blues* slides out glossy, watchable, and reeking of compromise—yet another high-quality photocopy of life from a man capable of painting it in watercolours.

Of course *Biloxi Blues* is funny. Simon could write witty one-liners in his sleep and hand them to mediocre actors and they'd still stand up. It's just a shame when he does exactly that. And it seems wrong somehow that he should practise such self-reduction so often and still consider himself a worthy subject for glorification.

But evidently he does, for *Biloxi Blues* is only one of a Simon trilogy on the subject of himself. In this section, which comes after *Brighton Beach Memoirs* and before *Broadway Bound*, Eugene Jerome is 20, in the army,

and stationed in Biloxi, Mississippi for training prior to World War II combat. His companions are the usual army-movie boneheads with a convenient knack for setting him up for snappy comebacks. His enemy is their slightly deranged drill sergeant, wonderfully played by Christopher Walken, who seems to have been genetically engineered to play deranged men, and who is worth the price of admission even in this light role.

Matthew Broderick is also the perfect choice for playing Jerome. Glib, self-satisfied, and altogether kickable, he gives the script no less and no more than it deserves. Although leagues from Richard Dreyfuss' *Goodbye Girl* brilliance, Broderick has fairly good comedic timing and keeps the film rolling wittily along.

If *Biloxi Blues* has a point, it is left unsharpened. After about an hour and a half of funny lines and a token pass at some issues (racism, homosexuality), the movie wraps up with a rather lame narration which includes the statement that life is weird sometimes. "When it comes down to it," Eugene summarizes accurately, "the only action we saw was up in Rowena's [a hooker's] room." Yeah, and we only got to see it from the waist up. But then, this is Neil Simon. □ **Pamela Swanigan**

Pic Transcends Its Destiny

GABY—A TRUE STORY Starring Rachel Levin, Liv Ullman, and Norma Aleandro. Directed by Luis Mandoki. Rated mature. Now playing at the Ridge.

Gaby—A True Story is a good enough movie to make even the most grudging reviewer haul out those rusty superlatives and confront the dreaded possibility of writing a positive review that

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is as fulsome as the bad ones are nasty.

By description, *Gaby* sounds like merely a high-calibre tear-jerker. Gaby Brimmer (Rachel Levin) is a victim of cerebral palsy. Her case is so severe that she is unable to move any part of her body except her left foot. Because she cannot speak, no one knows if her mind has been affected until the maid, Florencia (Norma Aleandro), discovers that Gaby can be taught to communicate through foot signals.

Using that foot, with which she soon learns to type, and her near-telepathic connection with Florencia, Gaby graduates from a regular high school, attends university, and becomes a published writer and poet.

Good movies of this type clear away extraneous realities to illuminate the core of their subject. But in *Gaby* reality retains its true position, simplicity and complexity their true proportions.

Here, it is the core itself that shines, turning its context translucent and illuminating inner forms which we all possess and seldom see.

The credit goes to an understated script, superb direction, and crystalline performances by all the actresses and actors. Liv Ullman's tortured brow has rarely been put to better use, and Lawrence Monoson is very moving as Fernando, Gaby's boyfriend. Norma Aleandro, who was nominated for a Best Supporting Actress for this role, mainly wears one expression, sort of like the Mona Lisa wears one expression.

But the film is really carried by Rachel Levin, herself once a victim of Guillain-Barre syndrome, a progressive muscular degeneration that can lead to paralysis. Levin channels an entire life-force through a single foot like a waterfall through a faucet, conveying the incredible power, the unbearable restraint.

Some moments of *Gaby* are impossible to watch, as the mind jerks the eye from what it doesn't want to discover. At other points, the audience simultaneously laughs and cries. This is what happens when a tear-jerker transcends its destiny.

The superlatives shouldn't be wrung completely dry. It is possible to imagine a movie being better than *Gaby*. But it isn't possible to imagine *Gaby* being better than it is. □ **Pamela Swanigan**

WILLOW Starring Val Kilmer and Warwick Davis. Directed by Ron Howard. Story by George Lucas. Rated mature. Now playing at the Stanley and Lougheed.

Enter the world of *Willow*. Journey to the most stagnant part of your imagination, to a land of violence and sexism, where cliches and over-riden horses live side by side...to an idea that never existed, a message that never was.

It is a world where a young man named George Lucas churns out formulaic fantasies, making sums of money that explode beyond the boundaries of good taste.

So reads the promo for *Willow*, edited slightly to adjust for reality.

Was it the Ewoks, or did Lucas start losing it before then? His storyline for *Willow* shows none of the sense of relationships, of history, or of dialogue that made *Star Wars* great, nor the humor and suspense of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Even Rocky hasn't strayed so far from the things that made him famous, and that's saying something.

Willow begins with a seer's prediction that a baby soon to be born will cause the downfall of evil queen Bavmorda. Bavmorda orders all pregnant women seized and their infants inspected for "the mark". But a midwife escapes with the relevant baby, eventually putting her in a cradle of bulrushes (no kidding) and sending her downstream.

The baby is found by Willow, a member of a village of Nelwyns, or little people. Willow and exile Dalkini

warrior Madmartigan embark on a perilous journey (of course) to save the world and protect the baby from the truly awesome forces of Bavmorda.

Willow would have been boring as well as trite if not for Val Kilmer and his co-star, Special Effects. Kilmer, who was the youngest person ever admitted into Julliard at the time he entered, does for Madmartigan what Harrison Ford did for Han Solo, without the lines or the looks. And the combination of designs, effects, and stunning cinematography make the film highly watchable, if nothing else.

Essentially, though, *Willow* is just a stock hybrid of *King Arthur* and *Snow White*, right down to Bavmorda's stereotypical attire. Lucas apparently spent a year researching world mythologies before writing *Willow*, but what he ends up with is the hoariest of the Anglo-Saxon culture. Next time he should rely on his own imagination. At least the Ewoks were funky. □ **Pamela Swanigan**

On the Poignancy of Being Human

HOUSEKEEPING Starring Andrea Burchill, Christine Lahti, and Sara Walker. Directed by Bill Forsyth. Rated Mature. Now playing at the Fine Arts.

Housekeeping is probably the closest thing to **Harold and Maude** that the 1980s will produce. Although a far

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quieter and bleaker film, it has the same off-beat quality, the same view of youth as a part of our personalities rather than a phase of our lives, and a similar exploration of the choice between acceptance and freedom.

Young, withdrawn Ruthie and her outgoing sister Lucille are on the brink of their first encounter with that choice. After their mother commits suicide, they are raised by their grandmother in the small town of Fingerbone (actually Nelson, B.C.), and when she dies they inherit her oppressive house.

Drawn together by tragedy, ownership, and loneliness, the sisters are inseparable despite latent differences. But the arrival of their eccentric Aunt Sylvie, who is to take care of them (or vice versa, as they later suspect), is the catalyst of change. Ruthie is intrigued by Sylvie's oddity, Lucille embarrassed, and their disparate reactions slowly become a parting of ways.

The subsequent effect of Sylvie's strong personality

on Ruthie's unformed one has particularly **Harold and Maude**-ish overtones. The two embark on strange, albeit comparatively understated, escapades, and moments of inexplicable exhilaration break through the overall sense of oppressive isolation.

Housekeeping is not, however, a simplistic ode to nonconformity. As Sylvie, Christine Lahti displays the lonely side of freedom as well as its joys, and this balance is aided by Andrea Burchill's sensitive portrayal of the potentially shallow Lucille. Sara Walker gives an outstanding performance as Ruthie, composed mostly of silence in its various nuances, which makes drawing clear-cut conclusions from the film even more challenging.

Stripped of moralization, *Housekeeping* becomes something deeper than a message movie. It is a contemplation of choices, a study of relationships, and, above all, an eloquent celebration of the poignancy of being human. **Pamela Swanigan**

THE FABULOUS BAKER BOYS Starring Jeff Bridges, Michelle Pfeiffer, and Beau Bridges. Written and directed by Steve Kloves. Rated 14 years limited admission. Now playing at the Granville Cinemas, Coquitlam Cinemas, Park & Tilford Cinemas, Station Square Seven, and Clearbrook Cinemas.

In the world of commercial film-making, scripts have been killed and actors have starved for lesser sins than wanting to say something real in an intelligent way. But every now and then a movie escapes into distribution before anyone important can assess its quality-to-profit ratio and gives audiences a glimpse of what Hollywood could do if it weren't so hell-bent on making money.

The Fabulous Baker Boys is such a film, a surprisingly realistic study of one form of sibling relationship and several forms of artistic personality. Jeff and Beau Bridges play Jack and Frank Baker, a piano duo that has performed in second-string lounges for three decades and whose act is rapidly being rendered obsolete by changing audience preferences. When, in desperation, they hire sultry vocalist Suzy Diamond (Michelle Pfeiffer), their career is rejuvenated, but the lifelong pattern of their brotherhood is irrevocably altered.

It isn't the kind of plot-line to set the cash registers humming, but excellent acting and great production make this unlikely material engrossing, occasionally very funny, and often mov-

ing. The characters are time-worn types, given new life by a rare instance of successful type-casting: Beau Bridges exposes the caring side of the strait-laced, self-righteous older brother, and Jeff Bridges uses his considerable charisma to make the withdrawn, cynical, younger brother a forceful character.

Michelle Pfeiffer is also good in her role, a sort of three-in-one stereotype combo: the hard-bitten kept woman, the woman in love with a cold-hearted man, and the sensuous musical siren. The tentative displays of vulnerability come with the territory, but Pfeiffer plays them unusually well, and manages to sing convincingly, too.

The Fabulous Baker Boys is full of spaces and silences, details of gritty Seattle window-panes and pianist's hands, and jazz music performed by Dave Grusin, John Hammond, the Bridges brothers, and Pfeiffer. There are definite commercial leanings in places, especially towards the end, but somehow they don't do serious damage. Even the stock romance between Jack Baker and Suzy is elevated by the chemistry between Jeff Bridges and Pfeiffer, both of whom could probably create sexual tension with a lamp-post if they had to.

With no distinguishable market and limited appeal in the subject matter, *The Fabulous Baker Boys* is an anomalous gem. Some people will find it slow, but those who can adjust to its pace will feel like they've found a sapphire in a Smithrite. **Pamela Swanigan**