

Reel News

Robert Altman's next project will be the film version of the highly acclaimed play *Angels in America*, which will star **Al Pacino**. Altman is also sorting out another batch of **Raymond Carver** stories to make into a *Short Cuts* sequel ... **Tricky** has taken a substantial role in an upcoming **Luc Besson** film ... **Mary Stuart Masterson** makes her directorial debut on a script she wrote called *Grapefruit Moon*. **Francis Ford Coppola** will produce ... **Alicia Silverstone** will produce and star in the comedy *Excess Baggage*, as a girl who arranges her own kidnapping to get some fatherly attention. *Usual Suspect* **Benicio del Toro** joins her line-up ... **Mark Wahlberg** follows up his role in *The Basketball Diaries* with the lead in *Fear*, alongside **Alyssa Milano** ... **Chris O'Donnell** will co-star with **Sandra Bullock** in **Richard Attenborough's** upcoming Hemingway movie, *In Love and War*. He will also star in the film adaptation of John Grisham's *The Chamber*, which **James Foley** directs. Neither of these pieces of news should be confused with the fact Sandra Bullock is also to star in the **Joel Schumacher** directed adaptation of John Grisham's first novel, *A Time to Kill*, alongside **Samuel L. Jackson** ... **Ridley Scott's** next film is *White Squall*, which tells the story of a true-life maritime disaster and stars **Jeff Bridges** ... **Keenan Ivory Wayans** has produced **Paris Barclay's** debut feature, the piss-taking *Don't Be a Menace to South Central While Drinking Your Juice in the Hood* ... **Linda Fiorentino** and her *Last Seduction* director **John Dahl** are reunited with the tangled sci-fi tale *Unforgettable* ... **Ellen's Ellen DeGeneres** stars alongside **Bill Pullman** in the comedy *Mr Wrong* ... **Guiseppe Tornatore** (*Cinema Paradiso*, *A Pure Formality*) has written and directed *The Star Maker*, in which a snaky faker poses as a talent scout and tricks a bunch of country bumpkins into paying him for sham screen tests ... **Harrison Ford** and **Susan Sarandon** play restaurant owners in *Paying Up*, a comedy set the day before the stock-market crash of 1987. Other upcoming Ford roles (for which he will receive (US)\$20-million each) are alongside **Brad Pitt** in *Devil's Own*, and in the air action drama *Air Force One* ... you know the gossip which made **Melanie Griffiths** and **Antonio Banderas** cover stars of the women's mag set, but did you know the film on which they met, *Two Much*, also starring **Daryl Hannah**, is *Belle Epoque* director **Fernando Trueba's** English language debut? ... **Christian Slater** plays a lawyer who is a real devil's advocate in *Devil's Advocate* ... **Robert Redford's** next directorial project will be *The Horse Whisperer*, based on the **Nicholas Evans** novel which Hollywood Pictures bought the rights to for a record-breaking (US)\$3-million in 1994, despite the fact it was unfinished ... **Leonardo DiCaprio** and **Clare Danes** co-star in *Strictly Ballroom* director **Baz Luhrmann's** take on *Romeo and Juliette* ... even as **Madonna** films **Alan Parker's** *Evita* in Buenos Aires, protests to oust her from the sainted star spot continue. At least the city's mayor is on Maddy's side, and has gone out of his way to welcome her publicly ... **Tim Burton's** next film is the fantastically entitled *Mars Attacks!* ... **Arnold Schwarzenegger** follows the upcoming, big-bangin' action flick *Eraser* with another foray into comedy, as a dad with a mission in *Jingle All the Way* ... **Diabolique** (Jeremiah Chechik's remake of Henri-Georges Clouzot's *Les Diaboliques*) has hit a snag in the shape of Clouzot's widow. She claims to own all the rights to her late husband's work, and now plans to halt the film's release by taking her case to the French Ministry of Culture. Stay tuned to see if this will affect the film's September scheduled opening in New Zealand.

UPCOMING RELEASES

<i>Executive Decision</i>	May 3
<i>Four Rooms</i>	May 17
<i>Rumble in the Bronx</i>	May 17
<i>Mr Holland's Opus</i>	May 24
<i>City Hall</i>	May 24



Rebel without a camera: From *Dusk Till Dawn* director Robert Rodriguez.

Film

SWIMMING WITH SHARKS

Director: George Huang

A passably amusing entry in the Tinseltown bitch-fest genre, *Swimming with Sharks* opens promisingly with a clutch of sycophantic studio wannabes discussing Shelley Winters (who is only recognised when *The Poseidon Adventure* is mentioned). We titter as the ambitious Guy (Frank Whaley) scuttles around being Wimp Friday to tyrannical studio boss Buddy Ackerman (the gloriously slimy Kevin Spacey).

A triangle of sorts is formed by the equally ambitious Dawn (Michelle Forbes, an actor with the snappy style of a young Paula Prentiss). Along the way *Sharks* makes many revelations, both semantic (Guy is keen to make films for the dissed generation — disappointed, dismayed etc.) and kinky (who would have thought an envelope could be such an effective instrument of torture?).

Although *Swimming with Sharks* has a certain freshness, its denouement is a let-down. With better motivation or follow-up, it could have been a coup.

THE GRASS HARP

Director: Charles Mathau

This adaptation of Truman Capote's autobiographical novel has a lot of charm, and one can't help but wonder whether Mathau Junior had privileged access to a magical cast that includes Sissy Spacek, Piper Laurie, Mary Steenburgen, Jack Lemmon and, of course, Mathau's own father.

Growing up in small-town Alabama in the 40s springs to life through the artistry of these players. Lemmon, with slicked down hair, cheap jokes and even cheaper tricks, Mathau senior more relaxed than I have ever seen him, Piper Laurie transcendent as the tragic Dolly, and Mary Steenburgen offering a much needed injection of adrenalin as the sexy, hymn singing Sister Ida. There is some enjoyably broad playing from Nell Carter, as the feisty family cook and Roddy McDowell, as the camp barber to whom everyone is 'honey'.

While Capote's gentle watercolour doesn't touch on the darker side that fellow Southerners Tennessee Williams and Carson McCullers explored, the Piper Laurie character — both in her own right and in the strangely symbiotic relationship with her sister Verena (a rather severe Sissy Spacek) — makes a deeper emotional engagement with the viewer.

In the final count, at 107 minutes, this movie is stretching its modest material a mite and, as Patrick Williams' sub-Bernstein strings soar against rural Southern vistas, some hearts may harden.

OTHELLO

Director: Oliver Parker

Anyone tackling *The Moor of Venice* has an awesome example to follow in Orson Welles' brilliant 1951 filming of the Shakespeare play — a stunningly cinematic realisation, ingenious and outrageous by turns, inspired as much by budget exigencies as Shakespeare's imagery.

Parker's version for the 90s is a fairly conventional affair. The original play has been slashed, so the focus can settle on confrontations between the major characters. You'll not hear Iago's witty speech on the body as a garden, and for much of the film Desdemona's lines lie on the cutting room floor, while Irene Jacob gazes longingly, dances alluringly and writhes in *Othello's*

adulterous fantasies.

Laurence Fishburne is a smooth Moor. Not quite RADA, of course, but then didn't Olivier add a funky Jamaican swing to his voice in Stuart Burge's 1965 film? On the other hand, Kenneth Branagh's Iago is a far too likeable chap; doubtlessly the melodramatic music underneath his "I hate the Moor" is needed to signpost his villainy.

All the line cutting and dramatic scurrying is worth it for the last 20 minutes of the film. Here the drama is played out in all its brutality, led by the beautifully considered Emilia of Anna Patrick.

BUTTERFLY KISS

Director: Michael Winterbottom

'Thelma and Louise on something stronger than acid!' screams the headline, and this gal-pal road movie is streets away from the plucky bonhomie of Ridley Scott's movie. There's no room for a Brad Pitt in this intensely lesbian tale of two young women on a trail of murder and mayhem on the M1.

"Evil is in your heart. If you don't go out, you'll never get away from it," Eunice (Amanda Plummer) tells Miriam (Saskia Reeves), who, in the moving black-and-white interviews that punctuate the film, relates their story. Eunice is deeply psychotic, wearing enough chains under her shirt to tow an 18-wheeler; her killings are unpredictable and terrifyingly violent.

Plummer (last seen playing another gun-toting psychotic in *Pulp Fiction*) is extraordinary, nowhere more so than in the scene in which she berates God for forgetting her and allowing her to get away with her slaughter spree.

The soundtrack seems CD-friendly, but the songs are shrewdly chosen — from Helen Shapiro's perky 'Walking Back to Happiness' in the opening scene, through Patsy Cline and Björk, to the Cranberries' heart rending 'No Need to Argue', which underscores Miriam's final act of redemption, a scene of Bressonian power and insistence.

CHICKEN

Director: Grant Lahood

Chicken opens promisingly. The screen is a riot of bilious yellows, as Dwight Serrento (Bryan Marshall) croons his paean to fast-food chook. Suddenly we realise this pop hasbeen is a wannabeagain. Lahood's 'black comedy' starts rolling — Serrento tries to kickstart a career that died in the 60s by faking his death and becoming a rock legend. But, as the Essex once sang: 'Easier said than done.'

Another dramatic strand of the film is introduced with the character of Zeke (played by the unfortunate Cliff Curtis), a demented chicken's rights activist, who stomps around like an inbred cousin from a Gothic white trash movie.

There are so many red herrings, or should we say undeveloped ideas, ranging from a sinister roasting session in a suntan bed, to a bizarre case of 'the feathers', when Dwight is injected with some chicken hormones — one wishes that Lahood had followed his beak and created the kiwi equivalent of the *Chicken Woman* in Tod Browning's *Freaks*. When surgery is introduced, one hopes for a touch of *Dr Moreau*, but that also doesn't eventuate. When Dwight confronts a naked Betty (Joan Dawe), are we in for a spot of *Bad Boy Bobby*? Emphatically, no.

Trouper Ellie Smith tries to inject some life into the killer script, and valiantly mugs her way through some horrendously unfunny scenes (the ones with

her son are particularly deadly).

Chicken bears all the scars of being a feature extended 75 minutes beyond its running time. It could have been a tasty pullet, following on from Lahood's *Snail's Pace*, *The Singing Trophy* and *Lemming Aid*. It's come out as something of an under-stuffed turkey.

THE BIRDCAGE

Director: Mike Nichols

The disco grinds into action, the camera zooms over the Caribbean, and we're plunged into the day-glo delights of Miami's Birdcage. Mike Nichols and Elaine May revisit the 1978 classic *La Cage aux Folles* in this delightful comedy, transforming it into an edgy comment on the whole concept of 'family' in the 90s.

Molinaro's original film seems sedate by comparison, although much of the original plot remains. Eighteen years on, there's more glam 'n' glitz, including some ultra-camp dance numbers in five-inch heels; but there's also some tougher political satire, with the characters of Senator Kelley and his wife (an achingly funny Gene Hackman and Dianne Wiest) lampooned mercilessly for the post-Jesse Helms generation.

While Robin Williams' Armand doesn't quite match the faded charm of Ugo Tognazzi in the original, he does some brilliant turns — from a 30-second summary of four major choreographic styles, to a winning "song and soft-shoe-shuffle" with Christine Baranski. Nathan Lane (Armand's partner Albert) has played gay before (memorably in *Frankie and Johnny*), and he's scrumptiously funny, especially in the dinnertable confrontation with the Senator, where he expresses some sympathy for the Senator's right wing opinions. No one is safe from May's barbed wit in this satire. Yes, Virginia, there are Gay Republicans.

FROM DUSK TILL DAWN

Director: Robert Rodriguez

Robert Rodriguez's new film sets out on familiar terrain, a shoot-out in a TexMex liquor store. With Tarantino scripting, it's bloody and chucklesome and, in a later motel scene, even more twisted in its humour. After runaway crims Seth and Richard Gecko (George Clooney and a t-w-i-t-c-h-y Tarantino) have appropriated a disillusioned minister (Harvey Keitel) and his children (Juliette Lewis and Ernest Liu), the five eventually find themselves in the Titty Twister, "the wildest bar this side of the Rio Grande".

With a few grinds from the snake-twirling Santanico Pandemonium, star turn at the TT, road movie turns to Grand Guignol. Our valiant band and a few other assorted truckers and bikers find they are vampire bait. It's a tongue-in-cheek gore-fest: faces melted by holy water, guitarists strumming bloodied carcasses, and 1001 ingeniously varied stakings.

Remembering last year's *Desperado*, Rodriguez must have something to with the humour, as well as providing some of the tightest editing I've seen since his last film. Amongst the treats: Cheech Marin's inventive 'Pussy rap', enticing customers into the doomy dive; Fred Williamson's oration about the horrors of 'Nam; and Tom Savini's savvy Mexican biker, mini pop-up cannon in his crotch, and sheepishly trying to conceal his rapidly degenerating person.

WILLIAM DART