

# FILM

## THE FOOTSTEP MAN

**Director: Leon Narbey**  
Leon Narbey's new film is a brave venture; uncompromising in its complexity and its literary and psychological subtlety. It's the tale of Sam (Australian actor Steven Grives), a sound effects man (the 'Footstep Man' of the title) working on the post-production of a film about two prostitutes in Toulouse-Lautrec's circle. In a Pirandellian twist somewhat similar to the conceit behind Woody Allen's *Purple Rose of Cairo*, Grives becomes involved with Mireille, one of the characters from the French film, and intervenes to save her life on screen.

The switch between the 'real' film and the 'film-within-a-film' is fascinating, watching the manipulation of the screen characters. The eventual turn from a tragic to a more positive ending comes out at the moviola, from cutting out one of the actor's bloopers—a smile in 'real' life is transferred into the film.

Curiously, the Toulouse-Lautrec movie, with its brilliant recreation of 19th century Paris from the streets of Auckland, and nifty staging of some classic Toulouse-Lautrec paintings (will Narbey's next project be *Saturday in the Rue des Moulins with Henri?*), makes more emotional impact than the modern-day story. The relationship between the two prostitutes,

Mireille and Marcelle, thanks to the fine performances from Jennifer Ward-Lealand and Sarah Smuts-Kennedy, is extremely moving. The plot involving Grimes and his director Vida, is often less convincing, partially due to a stilted, cold performance from Rosey Jones.

For all the harrowing conditions of Paris in Toulouse-Lautrec's time, it many ways it seems more attractive than Auckland in the 1990s—but then perhaps that's something of what Leon Narbey and Martin Edmond's screenplay is saying.

**WILLIAM DART**

## THE PLAYER

**Director: Robert Altman**  
Robert Altman's not a man for standard studio product. There was a time when he seemed one of the most capricious spirits on the scene, with his work ranging from the intricate character-quilt of *Nashville* to the more claustrophobic, stage-bound *Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean*. He has had more than his ration of turkeys too, from the silly psychodrama of *Images* back in the 70s, through the talky pretentiousness of *Quintet* to the rambling mess of *Health*—a film that managed to pit stars like Glenda Jackson against Lauren Bacall and still be dull.

*The Player* is a carefully-ma-

nipulated return to the spirit of *Nashville*. Using the nominal format of a thriller, Altman takes Michael Tolkin's 1988 novel as the springboard for some pretty lethal satire at the expense of the town that did him wrong. With Tim Robbins as the Machiavellian movie executive, getting away with murder in the classic Hollywood manner—despite the efforts of Whoopi Goldberg's ultra-cool detective.

Altman offers some virtuoso technical touches, particularly with the eight minute tracking shot at the beginning of the movie as Robbins walks around the studio hearing everyone's ideas—the most amusing being screen-writer Buck Henry's ideas for a follow-up to his own 60s hit *The Graduate*. But whether the film has the wider political ramifications of *Nashville* is a moot point.

This is hardly the first film satirizing Tinsel Town. It's been done countless times, from Preston Sturges's *Sullivan's Travels* in 1941 through to the Coens' *Barton Fink*. Then there are Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard*, Minnelli's *The Bad and the Beautiful*, and Tashlin's *Hollywood or Bust* to name but three 50s classics. Just how much is *The Player* dependent on the endless parade of guest stars, some of whom will pass you by if you blink an eye. Some, like Angelica Huston appear as themselves, semi-informally; others—like Julia Roberts as a young

woman saved from the electric chair in a B grader—are integrated into the plot. Many are less evident—*Nashville* scriptwriter Joan Tewkesbury doing a hard-sell of new script ideas. It has already been suggested that you take a score card to the movie—and when it comes out on video, star-picking in *The Player* may well become the new trivial pursuit of 92...

**WILLIAM DART**

## THE NAKED LUNCH

**Director: David Cronenberg**  
I've never found myself particularly sympathetic to the strident psycho-horror of David Cronenberg's films, although his 1986 remake of *The Fly* seemed to have more structural cohesion than much of the pseud material that preceded and followed it. I had serious misgivings as to how he would cope with the surreal, dream-like visions of William Burroughs's *The Naked Lunch*.

Cronenberg's film is emphatically not a literal attempt to interpret Burroughs's writing. The original book was banned in this country for many years in the 'sixties (by the time his next opus *The Soft Machine* appeared, the Indecent Publications Tribunal members suggested that if you could manage to decipher it you deserved what ever prurient kick you might get). Cronenberg tries

Jennifer Ward-Lealand and Michael Hurst as Mireille and Toulouse-Lautrec in *The Footstep Man*

instead to look at the forces that created the book, presenting William Lee (Peter Weller as Burroughs himself) in Tangiers coping with all manner of narcotic ups and downs, and then trying to capture them on paper. It's a clever concept.

But what is mysterious and bizarre on paper can become very literal on the screen. Burroughs's Mugwumps are presented as cousins of *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*, and although Cronenberg comes up with some suitably weird 'monsters' of his own including a talking insect typewriter, much of the detail which makes the novel has been toned down or

eliminated. The allegory about the talking asshole is delivered with the distracting visual of a driving car—it would be more far more effective delivered in Burroughs's Kansas drawl against a blank screen.

In a film that may not initially have seemed to offer much in the way of believable characters, Weller, Ian Holm and Julian Sands work wonders, and Judy Davis plays a dual role as Joan Lee (Burroughs's wife) and Joan Cross (a character in the fabric of the novel). Just as her character in Barton Fink came to a sticky end, both Joans get shot.

**WILLIAM DART**

*Alien Meets RoboCop? Not quite... Peter Weller as Bill Lee enjoys a drink with a Mugwump in *Naked Lunch**



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