

Too many side roads weaken tale of conflict

By David Weissman

The Grifters
Directed by Stephen Frears
Cineplex Odeon Films

The Grifters is the story of three con artists at different stages of the game, and how their dangerous occupation and relationships with one another threaten to destroy their lives.

John Cusack stars as Roy Dillon, a moderately successful young man who can easily con victims out of small amounts of money. Anjelica Huston is Roy's estranged mother Lily, a veteran grifter whose job is to place large bets on a longshot horse to lower its odds so her mob boss doesn't have to make a big payoff if it comes in. Annette Benning plays Roy's lover Myra Langtree, a sexy seductress who uses her physical assets to evade her debts. The three soon become embroiled in a series of both harmless and dangerous cons against strangers and each other, in the scenic yet threatening backdrop of present day Los Angeles.

Although the idea of three con artists scheming to outwit their victims and each other has



John Cusack stars in *The Grifters* as Roy Dillon. He plays a hustler torn between his estranged mother (Anjelica Huston) and his lover (Annette Benning)

lots of possibilities, this film is more of a melodrama about a young man who finds himself the target of a fierce competition between two women, each vying for his affections, attention, and money.

A day after being punched out by a street-wise bartender, Roy is visited by his mysterious

mother Lily, who has dropped by on her way to the racetrack in the hopes of reestablishing ties with him. Lily arrives not a moment too soon, for the punch Roy took the day before causes him to pass out.

Using her network of connections, Lily gets to the hospital just in time to save his life. Having "given Roy life twice," Lily hopes for a reconciliation, but Roy's psychological wounds run too deep. Roy can't forgive her for having left him at home eight years ago and taking off. When Myra comes to visit, Lily is threatened as the two women express an immediate dislike of one another.

Having artfully set up this tangled web of treachery and deceit, the pace slows down through a series of angry scenes between Lily and Roy, who do little more than hurl insults and accuse each other of deception.

With first-rate actors like John Cusack and Anjelica Huston, a few well-chosen expressions and tightly controlled exchanges would do the trick. Instead these two talk, and talk, and talk.

Lily tells Roy that Myra is no good. Roy accuses her of being jealous. Lily wants to help

Roy, but Roy is bitter and ungrateful. Lily accuses Roy of being "on the grift." Roy accuses her of the same. An so on with each meeting, until the highly-charged energy fizzles out and leaves the audience wondering where the film is going.

Although clearly not as intense as David Mamet's gripping *House Of Games*, the combined talents of director Stephen Frears and producer Martin Scorsese are enough to make *The Grifters* worth seeing.

Spun in the gritty, tough-guy tradition of writers like Mickey Spillane and Raymond Chandler, the film is laced with a stylish mix of suspense, humor, and seduction.

Los Angeles is all at once a beautiful and dangerous place where men and women use lies and betrayal to satisfy their insatiable thirst for sex, money, and power.

The Grifters seeks to recreate the dark, sinister climate of the 50s, and in this respect it scores. But the film takes too many side roads to resolve the triangular conflict, leaving the audience to digest a soupy family melodrama.

Brilliantly played mind game leaps into dreams

by Shane McChesney

Silence of the Lambs
dir. Jonathan Demme
Orion Pictures

Silence of the Lambs is a 118 minute, brilliantly played mind game.

Jodie Foster is Clarice Starling, an FBI cadet called up from training camp by high-level fed investigator Jack Crawford (Scott Glenn). She is assigned to the manhunt for Buffalo Bill, a prolific serial killer who shears his victims of their skins as a lamb is shorn of its wool.

That's not where the film got its name, though — the title refers to the deeper story, Clarice Starling's drive to lay to rest her inner demons, a process that proves as risky as it is challenging. Her quest for Buffalo Bill becomes her chance to both prove herself and to free herself.

The only real leads to the killer's identity come from Starling's interviews with the brilliant psychiatrist, Dr. Hannibal Lecter. The problem with that arrangement is that Lecter, brilliantly brought to life by Anthony Hopkins, is himself a brutal mass murderer. He is more widely known as "Hannibal the Cannibal" due to the grisly nature of his killings. His teeth are as sharp as his intellect, and he uses both as weapons. From his eerie glass and stone cell, he drops vague clues for Starling in the form of riddles and anagrams peppered with disinformation.

There is hardly a moment wasted in the film and, even better, it manages to avoid all the traps and predictable devices so commonly resorted to in this kind of work of suspense.

The hunters have absolutely no idea who the killer is, and neither do we, although we see plenty of him. Refreshingly, he isn't someone already involved in the story, and I can say that without giving a thing away.



Foster's character is not attacked in this film, a refreshing change for her, after violent gang rapes in *The Accused* and *Hotel New Hampshire*.

For a Hollywood picture, Clarice Starling is a female lead with rare

strength, which she maintains from start to finish. Foster accomplishes this without ending up a Rambo-type in a short skirt, or running around terrified in her underwear trying ineffectually to load a gun. Clarice is never the victim, but a

determined hunter. As deep in as she finds herself, she is never in over her head or in need of rescue by some guy with a bigger gun.

The mistakes made in the investigation are not hers, and she is never

reduced to a stumbling, overzealous schoolgirl. The lack of any gratuitous romantic subplot is appropriate — love scenes wouldn't fit in a film about sex killings (all of Buffalo Bill's victims are women, but the Cannibal's appetites are not sexual).

Although the whole story revolves around the grim subject of serial killers, *Silence of the Lambs* is not a gore film, although it could easily have been turned into one.

We are shown enough to horrify us, but the rest of the visuals focus on establishing an atmosphere of eeriness and suspense. The attention to detail is impressive, from the dank basement cells in which Hannibal Lecter is caged, to the mouth of a tunnel shrinking in a rearview mirror.

Anthony Hopkins has fun with his character, a superhuman killing machine with a sense of humor that is hard not to appreciate. He is a caged monster, played with an edge, and we hold our breath whenever Clarice gets too close to the glass or, later, the bars of his cells. The movie is worth seeing for Hopkins' character alone, although at times his harsh whispers are a little hard to pick up.

The director of the institution that holds Lecter is a little too one-dimensional as a self-serving bastard, and Scott Glenn as Jack Crawford, head of the investigation, doesn't really get a chance to leap off the screen at us in the way Hopkins and Foster do. These are tiny flaws, though, and unlikely to slow the film's climb to box office success — it picked up over \$12 million over its first weekend. That bodes well for Orion, a company in danger of going under (\$500 million in the red and sinking), a company that releases movies like *Dances With Wolves* and *Silence in a Time of King Ralph* and *Kindergarten Cops*. That's Hollywood... so catch the good ones while you can.

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