

ARTS

Crazy brothers basis for brilliant film

by Azed Majeed

Vincent and Theo
directed by Robert Altman
produced by Belbo Films

Vincent Van Gogh was one of the greatest painters who ever lived; he was also a major fruitcake. Now, Vincent we know about, but what of his equally weird brother Theo?

Well, put these two weird bros together in a film by the even weirder Robert Altman (Hey, don't get me wrong — the man is a genius — I'm talking about a good kind of weird) and you get one exceptional film.

Vincent and Theo chronicles the life of the great painter, although it offers little insight into the consistently enigmatic source of creative inspiration. Rather, it focusses on the conflicted relationship between art and the marketplace, using the two brothers as symbols.

Theo (Paul Rhys) is an art dealer in Paris; although he is aware of Vincent's talent, he is unable to interest buyers. Vincent (Tim Roth) is not easy on his brother or himself. His paintings are ahead of their time and therefore he can make no money from his art.

This story accurately reflects the career of not only Van Gogh, but Altman, a man for whom art is

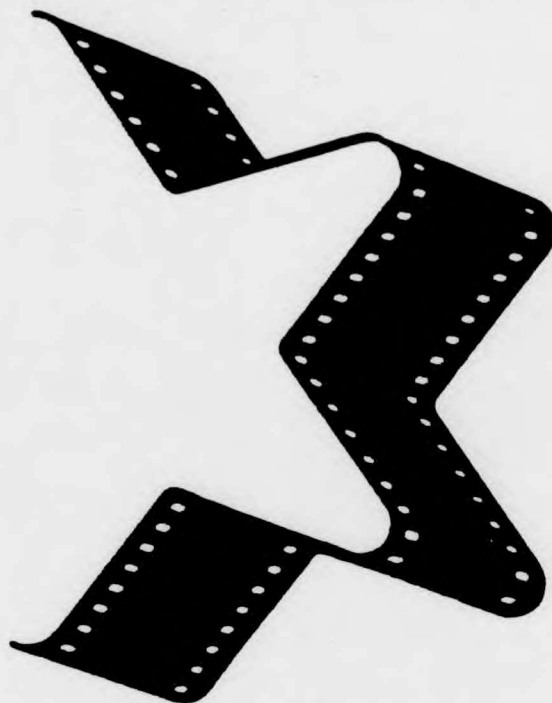
never compromised for the sake of commerciality. (He probably would have gotten a C+ in 1010.08 Film Production.)

Altman has had a tough time of it (this is me in my British mode). Although his films have been alternately praised and panned, there can be no contesting that he is a legendary film maker.

Still, he certainly does not carry the financial clout of Spielberg. This is not surprising considering the nature of the North American film industry, which is primarily concerned with suppressing anything resembling art. However, it is sad that the same man who has directed films such as *Nashville*, *M+A+S+H*, *Three Women*, *Streamers*, and *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, as well as countless other dandy gems, is still overlooked by the film industry and the film-going public.

I SAY ENOUGH!! IT'S UP TO YOU — THAT'S RIGHT, YOU!! MR. AND MRS. FRONTPORCH!! — TO GET THE HELL OFF YER LAZY DUFFS AND SUPPORT THIS FILM!! THEN I WANT YOU ALL TO GET UP, GO TO YOUR WINDOWS, OPEN THEM AND SCREAM AT THE TOP OF YOUR VOICE, "I'M MAD AS HELL, AND I'M NOT GOING TO TAKE IT ANYMORE!!!"

Vincent and Theo is a great



study of the parallels between brothers and the frustration borne out of the familial bond. Paul Rhys (Theo) is really keen as the frustrated would-be artist repressing his artistic calling in order to live a life on conventional stability as an art dealer. It is clear then that Theo is motivated by the same passion as his brother, but the guy has one major super-ego, ya dig? The film is really more Theo's story than it is Vincent's, (boy, talk about fueling a family fight, eh?), for it is Theo who recognizes and understands the madness of art.

Not that Vincent is short-changed... no way joe-zeh! Tim

Roth is fuckin' amazing — this guy is gonna be really big. He is so good and utterly frightening as the Mad Painter that I really would not like to meet him in a seedy bar in Texas, if you get my meaning.

After viewing Tim Roth's performance, I came to the conclusion that either he a) is truly a psychopath b) used to be a postal carrier or c) has seen *The Shining* way too many times. Anyway, he is fun to watch, both in this film and in Tom Stoppard's film version of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*.

The true star of *Vincent and Theo* is not either of the afore-

mentioned actors, but Altman himself. This is Altman's persevering statement that he will not succumb to the Hollywood market, but will continue to make films his way, without the support of the filmmaking community.

In *Vincent and Theo*, there is no indication of a change in style. This film is beautiful to look at, and contains all of the subversive elements which are Altman's trademarks. Altman uses his camera as an objective tool, in the tradition of "cinema verite" documentaries, capturing subtle glances and periphery action, which nonetheless are imperative to the film.

Another Altman trademark is the use of multi-layered sound, which forces the viewer to choose what to listen to, while confusing the viewer beyond full understanding of any of the myriad conversations. It's all here: the extensive use of the telephoto lens, the slow zoom and the fabulous mise-en-scene (now that I've used "myriad" and "mise-en-scene" in the same paragraph, I can no longer deny that I am nothing but a pretentious goof... woe is me).

Altman truly deserves to be revered. Even if you don't care for his films, you must admire his gumption in the face of continual pessimism from the industry and the public.

The only negative thing I can say about Robert Altman is that as a result of M*A*S*H, we now have to put up with Alan Alda's films.

Defy Gravity falls flat

by Jim Russell

Defy Gravity
directed by Michael Gibson
distributed by Creative Exposure

Defy Gravity is a "practice film." The lead actor is practicing for Summer Stock, the writer is creating characters for some other movie and the photographer has taken this opportunity to practice his focusing. Even the opening credits for this drama are auditioning for a comedy.

Bill (R. H. Thomson), a man with serious emotional problems, is supposed to be Joe Average wife beater and self-centred father figure. His lines, though, and especially Thomson's delivery are contrived and exaggerated to the threshold of absurdity.

Michael Gibson, the film's writer, intended *Defy Gravity* to be, in part, a story about Bill's difficulty coping with middle age, but he missed the mark. Instead, we have a story about one family's struggle with mental illness and despair as Bill's deplorable business methods and unrealistic expectations drive his family farther and farther toward disaster.

Patrick, his 15 year-old son, played by Simon Reynolds, cannot cope with domestic strife, not in his own home or among his friends. Instead, he goes to desperate lengths to distract the protagonists. At school, Patrick steps between warring factions or fakes fainting spells. At home, he resorts to shutting off the power to his whole house in order to stop his father from beating his mother.

Patrick's "coming of age" is the other half of this film. It is his physical and emotional journey that defies gravity. An adoring son that constantly makes excuses for his father's

brutality, Patrick finally breaks free of his father's influence and has him arrested.

Patrick's emotional and physical struggle to free himself from the domination of a loved one is a trek that most have made in one form or another. Why, then, can't we empathize with him? The answer lies in the writer's development of the character.

In the midst of domestic turmoil, Gibson has the teen clowning in class, daydreaming about his teacher as a Nazi seductress and chasing girls around the school boiler room. Rather than complementing his character and contrasting it with the shambles of his family life, these juvenile sidebars, belonging more to a sitcom, distract from the story's drama.

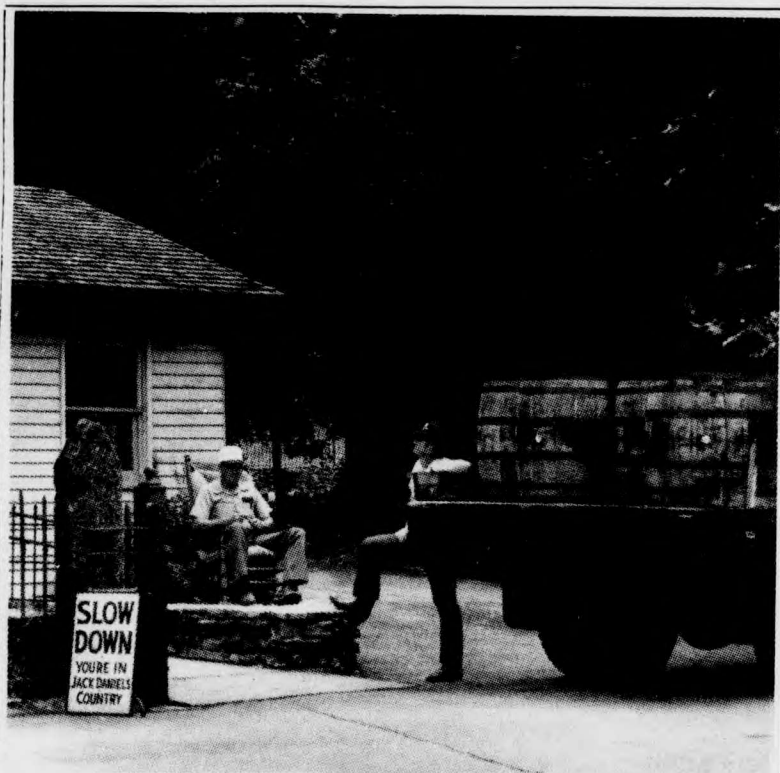
The same character weaknesses are found in his mother, a woman cloaked in white who carries her bruises with dignity; and his father, dressed in varying shades of black,

who vacillates between manic cheerfulness and violent rage.

The opening scene has the characters in this mess of a movie floating into the frame as if propelled by a trampoline. I had to switch on my penlight and give the press kit a scan. Could it be that *Defy Gravity* was really a comedy? Had I read the wrong movie description? No. Like Bill, the father, and Patrick, the son, the opening scene is IN THE WRONG FILM.

As if bad characterization, contrived acting and poor structure weren't enough, *Defy Gravity* is blessed (?) with a director of photography (Douglas Koch) who lights with skill and sensitivity, but... can't hold a focus! I felt I was in the middle of a home movie as I watched the cinematographer "search" for the right spot. Amateurish, to say the least — but, what the hell? They were just practicing.

I give *Defy Gravity* a one out of 10... only because they tried.



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Simon Reynolds and R.H. Thomson grin goofily in *Defy Gravity*. Can you tell it's Canadian?