

ARTS

Horror junkie alert: *Brain Damage* addictive

By NORMAN WILNER

There are, I'm sure, stranger films in the world than *Brain Damage*. The trick is finding them.

Frank Henelotter's *Brain Damage*, which recently played uncut at the Festival of Festivals, tells the story of a boy and his parasite, a love-hate relationship with overtones of sexual and narcotic horror.

Elmer is a foot-long, eel-shaped parasitic organism with the face of a Warner Brothers' cartoon character and the voice of — God help me — a Bing Crosby crooner. Brought to North America by the dubiously sane Professor Ackerman (Theo Barnes, who will not win any awards for his bug-eyed, gratingly didactic performance), Elmer grows bored with the Ackermans' menus of calves' brains and takes off in search of a new host.

Brian is the boy — a regular guy who just happened to be in Elmer's vicinity when a new host is required. The two form an odd couple, wandering through New York City in search of human brains, which to Elmer is the equivalent of a Haagen-Daaz binge.

But hold on a minute. I hear you saying, "Why on Earth would a human being carry a nasty, slimy brain-eater around with him?" The answer is simple: Brian needs Elmer.

Elmer is more than a parasite. He's a walking mainline machine, with no rubber tubes or clumsy plas-

tic syringes required. Elmer has the unique ability to inject Brian with a midnight-blue liquid that brings on euphoric hallucinations. Before you can shout, "Just say no," our unlikely hero is a slaving junkie, addicted to Elmer's magic juice.

In a nasty withdrawal sequence, we see there's no way out for our boy. Unable to do anything else, Brian becomes a sometimes willing, sometimes not, slave to the critter. After a few injections of the magic juice, titular brain damage sets in.

That is *Brain Damage*'s particular hook: the relationship between a man in his mid-20s and a 12-inch-long slimy parasite. You can't name one other film with that kind of buddy concept, can you? Go on, try. I didn't think so.

In 89 minutes, Brian and Elmer have innumerable (and sometimes interminable) conversations about life, death, the nature of hallucinations and, of course, brains. Sample exchange, after Elmer has attacked and begun to eat a security guard:

Brian: What did you do to him? Is he okay?

Elmer: Not bad. A little underdone . . .

I bet you think I'm making this up.

The kicker is that *Brain Damage* is easily interpreted on so many levels. It can be homophobic (a man talking to a foot-long phallic symbol about his "juice" is rather easy to interpret) or viciously anti-drug (Brian is

addicted to Elmer's fluid, Elmer to human brains, with both cravings leading to the pair's ultimate downfall). But it is always fascinating: bleak horror mixed adroitly with the cruelest black comedy.

Wracked with Elmer stuff withdrawal, Brian vomits and whimpers while the parasite sings and dances in a sink. It induces hysteria in both senses of the word, as the audiences tries to decide whether to laugh or throw up.

The acting is less than adequate. The film's style is disjointed, with occasional bursts of action between long, expository stretches of dialogue. In addition, Henelotter as a writer is just slightly better than Henelotter the director.

Sure Rick Herbst, who plays Brian as the ultimate Everyman (we learn that he lives with his brother and has



BOSOM BUDDIES: Brian questions his friend Elmer.

a girlfriend — nothing more: his job, past, and personality are all ignored) is engaging but unconvincing. Perhaps Brian is just too average to engender our sympathy, or we aren't as interested in him as we are in the

events he has caught us in. Jennifer Lowry, as his erstwhile girlfriend, is extraordinarily wooden but attractive in her window-dressing role. The camerawork is interesting on occasion but, for the most part, unremarkable.

Brain Damage is available on videocassette from Norstar Entertainment (and has been since late July, making the Festival "premiere" somewhat pointless, but nice all the same). It may not be the first anti-drug horror movie (that honour belongs to David Cronenberg's *Scanners*) but it's certainly the weirdest. Find the tape because it has almost no hope of getting a theatrical release, and this film should not be missed by any serious horror junkie.

"Horror junkie?" Well, I suppose we all have our addictions . . .



A TIGHT SITUATION: Harry Washello (Anthony Edwards) in DeJarnett's *Miracle Mile*.

Sixties revisited

By MICHAEL REDHILL

The most interesting thing about Morely Markson's update of the '60s loudest voices is that it affirms the ideals of that time as often as it invalidates them.

We watch a 19-year-old John Sinclair demand that all schools "be turned into crashpads," and in the present, the older John Sinclair howls at his former self.

"When you see this guy," he laughs, "all you want to do is arrest him."

In another case, we see Abbie Hoffman employ the same rhetoric to champion the modern causes that concern him. His credo remains the same: "You don't have rights if you don't use them."

Meanwhile, Allen Ginsberg has changed his mantra from "ohm" to "ahh" and still sits lotus in the park with his portable accordian — only now he wears a leisure suit.

Much of Markson's *Growing Up*

In America presents these fascinating visual and intellectual contradictions. It begs the question: what are the '60s about, anyway? What could they be about if Jerry Rubin is renovating restaurants for the bourgeoisie and Timothy Leary is computer literate?

Markson's documentary about America's last rebellion presents the facts straightforwardly. Were they college grads who just blew the rhetoric out of proportion? Did they really want to change the world, or were they egomaniacs? Was it a period of "windbag gaseousness," as Leary puts it?

Growing Up In America may not answer these questions, but it will change how quickly you answer them.

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The raw reality of annihilation

By MICHAEL REDHILL

Throughout the glut of movies about nuclear war, none has really registered the reality of dying in a 700-degree nuclear wind. Despite all the prosletizing and reaffirmations of humanity, not until *Miracle Mile* has anyone dealt straight-forwardly with annihilation.

Director Steve DeJarnett's vision of the end of the world is shown with frightening clarity. He has carefully populated a world unmistakably ours with uninterestingly normal people. Harry Washello (Anthony Edwards) is a young trombone player infatuated with Julie Peters (Mare Winningham), who slings

hash at the neighbourhood coffee shop. They fall in love, someone presses the button, and seventy minutes is all they have left.

Miracle Mile is not about saving ourselves from nuclear war — it picks up where the lectures leave off and sets itself up as the last story ever told. Cooler minds do not prevail here.

The script is often weak, but it lends a strange surrealism to the film. The director opts for a loose style, sometimes skirting the edge of bad theatre with mawkish, overwrought, or even flat-out bad performances.

But *Miracle Mile*'s central conflict

is so real that its bright light shimmers threateningly at the edges of the screen. As the characters wait, we are overwhelmed by its supreme importance. Intentionally or not, the inexorable flight of the bomb makes everything else in the film insignificant.

It's interesting how urgent this message becomes stripped of artful trappings. DeJarnett, decidedly mainstream in his approach, creates a new metaphor for futility by denying the subject any of the popular metaphors we have come to associate with it. Stripped raw, *Miracle Mile* becomes the nightmare those other films were talking about.

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