

Cradle Will Rock gets some breaks

BY MARK EVANS

During the 1930s, a precursor to Senator Joe McCarthy's infamous Communist witch-hunts existed in the form of the Dies Committee. Led by Congressman

Dies, to root out 'anti-American activities,' one of his targets was the Federal Theatre Program, who, on top of being un-American, also provided affordable entertainment to the masses during the Great Depression

Cradle Will Rock is set during this turbulent period when unions were attempting to reestablish themselves, and some people were forecasting that they would bring down the American government. It concerns several stories that remain

distinct, yet feature interlocking characters and together weave a complex tale of life during the 30s.

The main story is concerned with a production of a new play entitled *Cradle Will Rock*, being produced by John Houseman (Cary Elwes) and directed by Orson Wells (Angus MacFayden). The other stories concern Nelson Rockefeller (John Cusack) contracting a mural from Diego Rivera (Ruben Blades) to be done in the entrance to his new building that doesn't turn out quite like Rockefeller intended. The show also deals with the dealings of Gray Mathers (Philip Baker Hall), a respected steel magnate, with his wife, Countess LaGrange (Vanessa Redgrave), and an attaché for Benito Mussolini, Margherita Sarfatti (Susan Sarandon), who is soliciting funds for Italy.

While the nature of the enormous ensemble cast doesn't permit the space to say something about everybody, there are some real standouts here. John Tutturo's character of Aldo Silvano is a fascinating study of Italian-American life during the rise of Mussolini and the scenes between himself and his family were done very well.

Hank Azaria's portrayal of Marc Blitzstein — the writer of *Cradle Will Rock* (the play) — is brilliant, and the way the movie illustrates how his artistic creativity works within his mind is clever and entertaining.

The best character in the film,

bar none, is Angus MacFayden's portrayal of Orson Welles. Though Welles was probably nowhere near as outrageous as he is in this film, we can all wish it such. He brings utter chaos to his parts of the movie, and it is absolutely hilarious to watch him bounce around like a madman.

While good, the movie is not without its flaws. For one, the Countess played by Vanessa Redgrave is irritating at times, but thankfully she isn't in many scenes. A more serious flaw is the hyper-kinetic pace of certain portions of the movie. It can be very difficult to tell just exactly what is being said during some parts, and things jump around quite a bit.

The way the last shot of the movie is set up is both clever and thought-provoking, but it really leaves you wanting more. Ending on an intellectual note is good, but there isn't enough closure with any of the other characters. Sure it's not hard to recall what happened to Orson Welles, but the movie could've done with a blurb about where the other lives went.

Bottom line: Recognizing the weakness in some of the characters, and the overwhelming speed of a couple scenes, this is still a good film. This is not going to appeal to everybody, especially with its heavy historical slant. As comedic dramas go, however, this is definitely an above-average effort. Three stars out of four.

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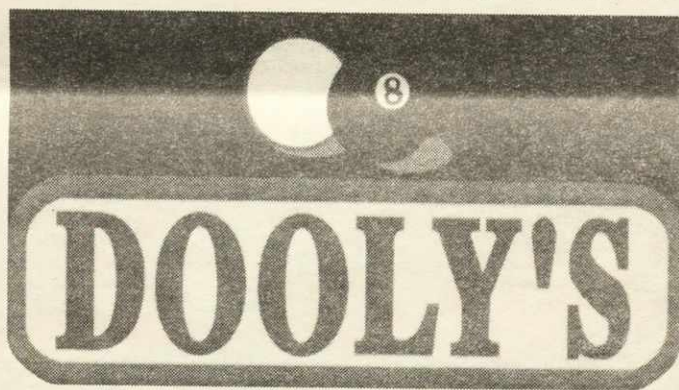
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