

# ENTERTAINMENT

## Roget's Pocket Collection of Gangster Stereotypes

**The Cotton Club**  
Orion Pictures  
Odeon Theatre

review by David Jordan

The holiday season's biggest disappointment had to be *The Cotton Club*. The 1920's and 30's were exciting years, and have inspired some great films, like *The Great Gatsby*, which captured all the desperate excitement of the lost generation, or *Lady Sings the Blues*, in which Diana Ross did a superb job of portraying the hopelessness of a black entertainer in the dirty thirties.

So when Orion Pictures announced that Francis Ford Coppola was taking charge of a \$47 million budget in a film about a Harlem nightclub during the depression, expectations ran high. Unfortunately, *The Cotton Club* captures none of the excitement of the times. It is merely a pastiche of gangster cliches, a random sampling of outtakes from *Godfather III*.

Francis Coppola is fascinated by the boom and bust years of post-WW I America; ten years after writing the screenplay of *The Great Gatsby*, he returns to the subject with *The Cotton Club*, this time taking credits for directing as well as writing.

Coppola's original inspiration for the movie came from a "pictorial history" of Harlem's Cotton Club, a mob-owned nightclub that flourished from 1923-36. In the movie, actors portray such historical figures as Cab Calloway, James Cagney, and a handful of gangsters and jazz musicians.

But the historical authenticity of the movie is destroyed with the opening shot: Richard Gere is hammering out a soulful trumpet duet with a black musician. It's hard to imagine anything more ridiculous—perhaps a Nick Nolte/Louis Armstrong duet.

All of the characters are straight out of Roget's Pocket Collection of Gangster Stereotypes. There's Dutch, the psycho killer, who stops just short of a cheap "you dirty rat, you" Cagney imitation. Joining him are

Frenchy, the muscle-brain bouncer, Owney Madden, the jovial father-figure murderer, and a handful of stooges and thugs.

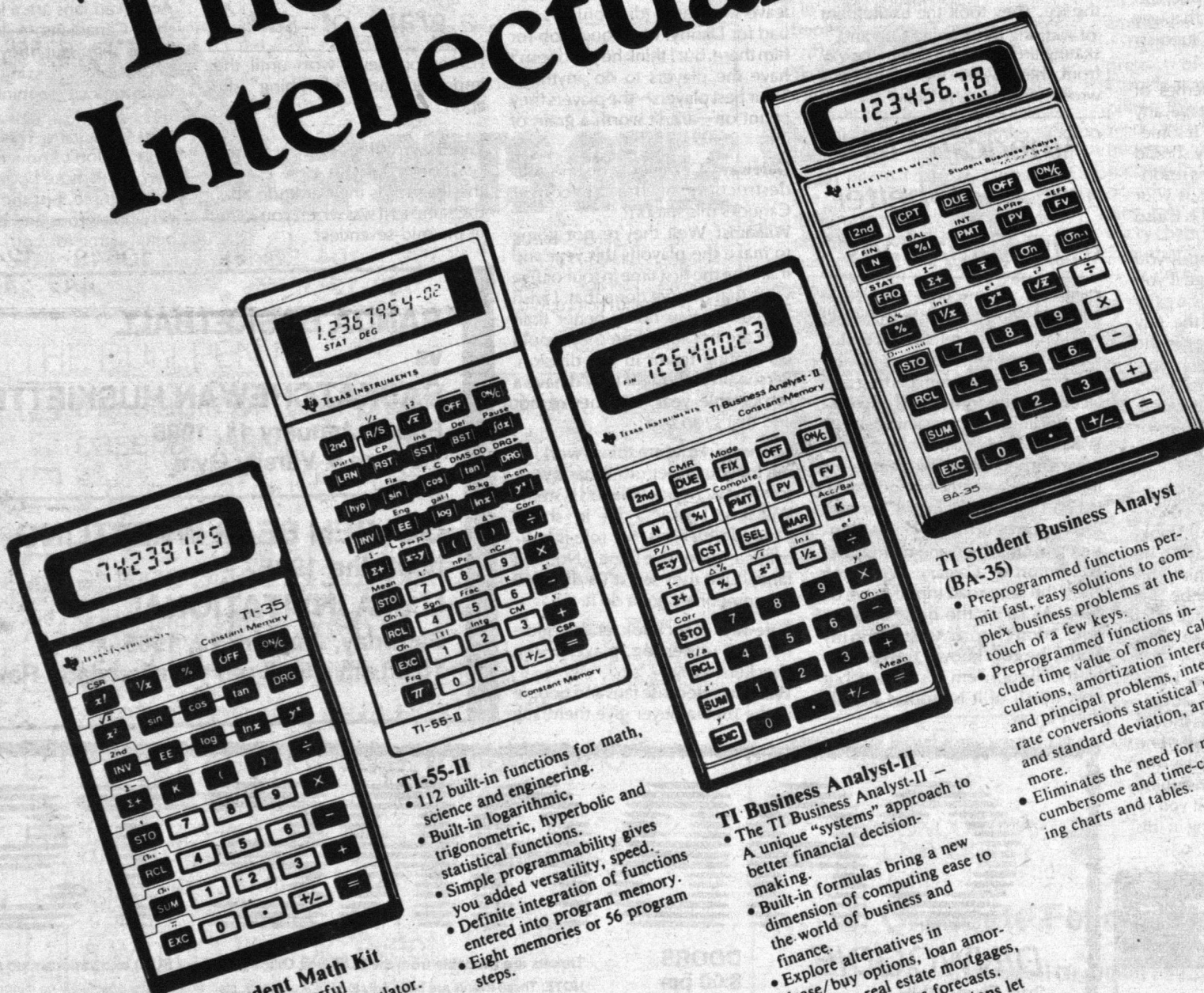
Diane Lane is awful as Vera Cicero, partly because of the cardboard role that is scripted for her, but mostly because she has no talent. As the helpless protege of a ruthless mob king, her vocabulary is limited to such zingers as "anything you say, Dutch," and "Someday maybe you'll wise up, sap." Granted, lines like these don't give the young actress much to work with, but her melodramatic posturing only heightens the farce.

The camera work is beautiful, and Coppola went to a lot of trouble to find hundreds of 20's and 30's suits and dresses (he even had thousands of Cotton Club matchbooks printed), but *The Cotton Club* neither instructs nor amuses. *The Cotton Club* proves, once again, that no matter how many millions of dollars you throw at a movie production, without writing and acting there just ain't no show.



"Maybe someday you'll wise up, sap," Vera (Diane Lane) tells Dixie (Richard Gere) in *The Cotton Club*.

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