

ARTS

Too many production meetings

by Simon Chung

Postcards From the Edge
directed by Mike Nichols
produced by Columbia Pictures

Postcards From the Edge, based on Carrie Fisher's 1987 novel, chronicles the life of a moderately famous actress as she tries to find life after rehab. The novel — when it works — is an amusing and flighty post-mod pastiche of the Hollywood set.

The film, directed by Mike Nichols (*The Graduate*, *Silkwood*), suffers under a heavy-weight cast that includes Shirley MacLaine and Meryl Streep. It never quite takes off.

Streep plays the aforementioned actress, Suzanne Vale, who must piece her life back together after a near-fatal overdose. MacLaine plays her overwhelming showbiz mother.

I am convinced that MacLaine's character (which occupied no more than half a page in the book) was suggested by some Harvard MBA studio exec — or by Nichols himself — at one of those brain-dead Hollywood production meetings to bolster the film's marketability. "Why don't we pair Meryl Streep with Shirley MacLaine? She's big with the New Age crowd and great on talk shows — just don't put her on Letterman."

Unfortunately, as we all know, Dame Streep (fabulous actress though she is) has sub-zero box office potential.

Carrie Fisher has a sharp ear for dialogue. The best part of *Postcards* is the use of hilarious rapid fire one liners (like: "Do you always talk in bumper stickers?" and "Instant gratification takes too long."). They are funniest when played small.

Nichols, however, insists on dragging us into the syrupy water of mother-daughter melodramas. The supposedly dramatic scenes between MacLaine and Streep are totally without spark, because their relationship seems so sanitized. Fisher pulls back from making MacLaine's character the monster she should be, as if she's afraid that we will associate the character with her real life mom, Debbie Reynolds. Consequently, the conflicts between mother and daughter are played out in a drab vacuum.

Somewhere along the way (must be at those production meetings), Fisher's script loses its



Shirley MacLaine makes a point to Meryl Streep in *Postcards From the Edge*. So much television, so many executive decisions . . .

sense of humour just when it needs it the most. The film definitely reaches its nadir near the end, when Streep, without apparent irony, renders a country and western song about checking out

of rehab clinic while Ms. MacLaine looks on with a big "everything's alright now" smile. One would think that if we are forced to endure melodrama, we could at least have *Mommy Dearest*

instead of a bargain basement *Terms of Endearment*.

The person who has the clout to attract the two high profile actresses is none other than Nichols, who has a reputation in the indus-

try as being an "actor's director." In practical terms, this means:

A. He can get big stars like Richard Dreyfuss and Gene Hackman to play 30 second bit parts that any Los Angeles area waiter could do equally as well (for a fraction of the salary).

B. He has absolutely zilch visual sense. With its faulty lighting and endless static waist-up shots, *Postcards* looks duller than your average daytime soap.

C. That he takes himself far too seriously, which makes him eminently unsuited to direct what should have been a whimsical, elliptical comedy.

Despite its many inadequacies, *Postcards from the Edge* may well be remembered by posterity for capturing the Robert De Niro award (to Shirley MacLaine) for the greatest personal sacrifice for a role. Not since the well known method actor put on a million pounds for *Raging Bull* has an actor given so much of himself, so to speak, for a part.

In a hospital scene, MacLaine does without the benefit of make-up or hair, and she looks like a cross between a late, late, Lillian Gish and a nuclear war survivor. Talk about out on a limb.

Doctors dying to deal with guilt

by Jim Russell

Flatliners
directed by Joel Schumacher
produced by Columbia Pictures

Remember that kid in grade two? Yeah . . . the one you were mean to. Remember the pain and suffering your name-calling caused? Remember his cries and tears when you and your friends pummeled him with chunks of dirt? Well . . . death remembers, even if you don't.

Or won't. *Flatliners* is about that kid, or that one night stand, or any one of a million acts of shame that each of us commit in our lives. *Flatliners* is about that guilt, which lies just below the surface of our consciousness, waiting to be freed from its bondage.

Kiefer Sutherland (Nelson), in his best performance to date, plays a moody, compulsive medical student who recruits four of his reluctant classmates to help him take a one minute vacation to a place that has always fascinated him: death.

Nelson dies and lives to tell about it, as do three of the others, but the price they pay for their foolishness is more than they could ever have imagined. Floating through the doorway of death, they are drawn directly to their guilt; in Nelson's case, the tragic death of a childhood friend.

In the case of Rachel (Julia Roberts, in her first movie since the certified fluff of *Pretty Woman*), it is her father's suicide. For Joe (William Baldwin), it is a legion of betrayed lovers; for David (Kevin Bacon), an abused schoolmate. The characters, returned to life by technology, bring back the guilt they had buried.

According to *Flatliners* press bump, writer Peter Filardi's past credits are just about nil. Before *Flatliners*, he had sold only one script, for the television series *MacGyver*. If that is true, he certainly is starting off in the business with a bang; *Flatliners* is expertly crafted from a wonderfully original idea, with dialogue



When Keifer and the gang get together, they kill each other to find out what happens after death in *Flatliners*.

that is well written and often funny.

It is truly unfortunate, however, that Filardi allowed the story to become subservient to his religious beliefs. *Flatliners* is about God and heaven and hell and, most of all, atonement. Those actual words were never used, but the concepts were ever present, right through to the end of the movie. Message films don't usually work, perhaps because the writer's passion for the message overpowers his objectivity. *Flatliners* is no exception.

The "message" is not the only villain in this film. There are others — not on the screen, but behind the camera, away from the set, in a room marked SPECIAL EFFECTS DEPT. "Gratuitous indignities to the human body" is the nicest description for their handiwork.

Hypodermic needles slide effortlessly into a patient's throat, scalpels slice smoothly into flesh, actors stitch gaping wounds and cadavers lie disembowelled before the camera. These "cheap chills" may add immeasurably to the special effects technicians' portfolios, but only detract from the already suspenseful script and direction.

On the plus side, Jan De Bont's cinematography was excellent. The lighting, less inspiring, was still good. The sound stage set, a university interior, combined Greek, Roman, Gothic and Renaissance architectural styles to give it that "plywood deco, Disney World" look.

Flatliners is a movie with sub-

stance that will stay with you long after the average film has faded from your memory.

Give it a seven out of 10.

Frankensteinian filmmaking

by Ira Nayman

Taking Care of Business
directed by Arthur Hiller
produced by Hollywood Pictures

Taking Care of Business has a wonderful title sequence. No, really; it's neat.

There's this adorable little cartoon figure pushing these huge dates into an oversized filofax while this other adorable little cartoon figure wanders around and tosses a baseball in the air. The dates start coming faster, then facts, then charts and graphs and, before you know it, the cartoon figure is being chased across the screen.

Nice titles. Shame about the movie.

Taking Care of Business is about a small time car thief (Jim Belushi) who breaks out of prison to see the Cubs play in the World Series. While out, he finds the filofax of a workaholic business-

man (Charles Grodin), and takes over his life for a couple of days.

If it sounds familiar, think of *Trading Places*, but with Eddie Murphy's character from *48 Hours*, mixed with any bad prison film you'd care to name. *Taking Care of Business* is Frankensteinian filmmaking at its worst.

This film panders to instincts in the audience that are better left untouched. The poor man getting the chance to live it up while a rich man gets a humiliating taste of poverty is a popular fantasy in our society, where wealth is people's major obsession and the yardstick by which they judge others.

The fact that, in this case, the rich man turns out to be very nice, and the poor man has no obvious redeeming qualities (making the switch in their circumstances more cruel than just) was completely ignored by the audience with which I saw the film. I would have attempted to look beyond

this if the film was funnier; unfortunately, it is predictable and riddled with cliches.

The script is sexist in its portrayal of women, which is surprising considering a woman (Jill Mazursky) co-wrote it. The characters are poorly drawn, the story is unbelievable and, well, let's face it: this was just not a good movie.

The only bright spot is Grodin's performance, which, in an understated way, is delightful. With Veronica Hamel (as his wife) Grodin gives *Taking Care of Business* its only moments of recognizable human life; unfortunately, they are almost immediately swamped by mechanistic plot complications.

Grodin continues to be vastly underrated in Hollywood. It's a shame, but films like *Taking Care of Business*, no matter how good he is in them, will do nothing to change that.

"JUST ABOUT PERFECT...
marvelously literate,
comic and romantic."

—Peter Travers, *Rolling Stone*

"★★★★HILARIOUS
AND WONDERFUL...
I absolutely loved it!"

—Rex Reed, *At the Movies*

"A DISARMING AND
DELIGHTFUL COMEDY."

—David Ansen, *Newsweek*

"RICH AND NUTTY...
a fine new film by a fine
new director."

—Vincent Canby, *New York Times*



Whit Stillman's
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PG CINEPHILE

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