

Miracle-worker film works

Lean On Me ***
Famous Players Capitol Square

review by Mona-Lynn Courteau

There have been several films of late heralding real-life miracle-worker educators, the most prominent of which is *Stand and Deliver*. In that film, the meek but quick-witted George Olmos accepts a position at a tough high school, containing predominantly Hispanic rebel-types. He then takes a class with elementary-level math skills and leads them to top average on a State

...above the typical disposable high-school flick.

calculus exam, mending their self-respect at the same time. The film was a fine one with only minor imperfections.

Lean on Me follows in this tradition. It is about Joe Clark, a black teacher at the reputed Eastside High in New Jersey who gets transferred out in 1967 due to his aggressive, defiant stance. In the succeeding 20 years, the school degenerates into a violent, undisciplined joke, with gangs, thugs, and crack rings running rampant. Only around 30% of the school's 3,000 students can pass the state's Basic Skills Exam. "Crazy Joe," played by Morgan Freeman, is hired back as principal and given one year to raise this percentage to 75.

His first act is to expel 300 students. He treats his staff like a despot, and goes into fits of rage at the most minute things. Other questionable methods include bully-

ing, threatening, and publicly turning everyone into a bad example.

Director Norman Twain puts in a good effort, filming on location and consulting narrowly with Joe Clark, but he errs several times. There are also problems with the unevenness of the script. Although Freeman gets to deliver some good, snappy lines, he is often left to fight with monologues which try too hard and are obviously meant as philosophical "art forms" (you know the type). They often lack direction, and thus effectiveness. Several of the lines are just plain vacuous, like this one, quipped while brandishing a baseball bat at the fire chief: "They used to call me Crazy Joe; well, now they can call me Batman."

On the whole, though, the script does the job, but its weaknesses are magnified because of a delivery problem. It proves to be a real challenge for the actors, who don't quite hit the mark. Robert Guillaume (remember Benson?) and Beverly Todd are pretty good as District Superintendent and Vice-Principal. Freeman has his moments as Clark, though he sometimes overacts a little. Twain stumbled, though, with the character of Mrs. Barrett (Vivian Thigpen), head of a parents' group whose goal is to get Clark fired. Thigpen certainly has the look of an antagonizing witch, but her acting is too conscious, and her character is exaggerated.

Lean on Me is good enough to be classed above the typical disposable high-school flick. Unfortunately, it does occasionally fall into the trap of contrivance. For instance, one gal is apparently so engrossed in her American History at her burger-joint job that she forgets about the beef. It burns ferociously under her nose, but her boss only frowns, douses it with water, and forgets it (I guess his standards



Shape up or ship out!

Morgan Freeman as "Crazy Joe" Clark in *Lean On Me*, a sometimes inspiring film that reprises the miracle worker genre of *Stand and Deliver*.

weren't too high.

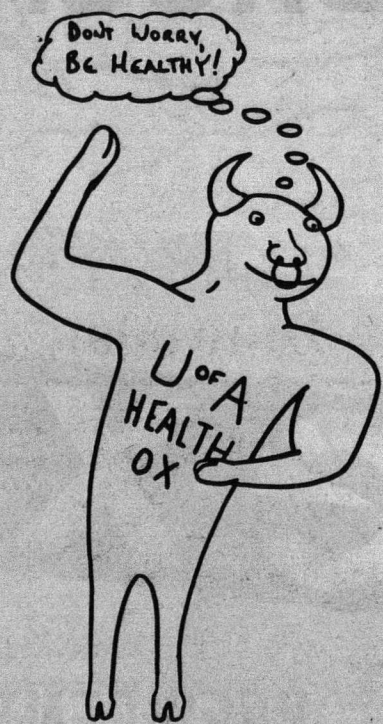
Another example of this is the soundtrack. Our first look at the school shows fights, graffiti, kids shoved in lockers, a teacher rushed to the hospital due to head injuries, drug dealing, bullying of every description, sleazy types, and so on. This could have been a dramatic scene, but the blaring of "Welcome to the Jungle" overtop is just unsuitable; it really detracts from the scene's gravity. Other such hits riddle the film, wrecking every scene with potential impact. The best part, musically, is in the gym near the end, when everybody bursts into a triumphant rendition of (you

guessed it) "Lean on Me." This energetic scene has that gospel feel, and perfectly depicts black culture; it's really quite inspiring.

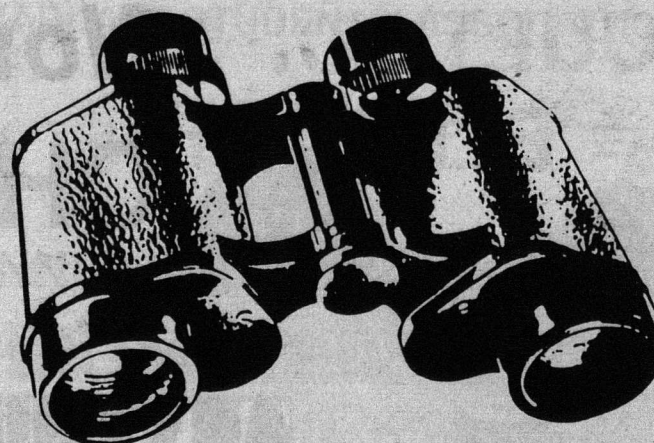
Altogether, *Lean on Me* turned out quite well, but it doesn't quite reach the heights of *Stand and Deliver*, perhaps because there is just too much to deal with (2700 students as opposed to one class). It gets three stars because, for the most part, it refuses to stoop to mindless commercialism. Obviously the movie was made out of respect for the real Joe Clarke rather than just for bucks.

HEALTH WEEK

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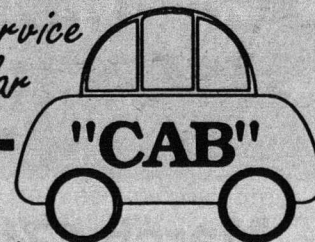
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