



Alien Nation: which is the alien and which is the human?

Aliens too down to earth

Alien Nation **
Cineplex-Odeon

review by Glenn St-Germain

Los Angeles, 1991. The aliens have landed, and they are now among us. They have integrated themselves into Earthling society. They live next door. Who are they?

In the film *Alien Nation*, so the story goes, a large flying saucer landed in the Mojave Desert in 1988. Apparently, they took a wrong turn somewhere and landed here, and were unable to take off again. So, after a few years of quarantine, they were allowed out and invited to move in among us Earthlings. They settled in the Los Angeles area (there goes the neighbourhood), and tried to fit into human society.

At the time of the opening of the story, they've been here a few years, and have, for the most part, fit in. The "newcomers", as they are politely referred to, have jobs, homes, cars, etc., just like normal people.

The movie itself is a cop movie. Detective-sergeant Matthew Sykes (James Caan) is a hard-boiled, down-and-out detective whose partner is killed by a couple of newcomers caught in the process of robbing a grocery store. (Talk about your illegal aliens!) His partner is assigned the next day: Sam Fransisco (Mandy Patinkin), the first newcomer L.A. police detective.

Together, this odd couple of detectives try to solve the murders of a few aliens, which just might be connected to the death of Sykes' old partner. And along the way, Sykes (and the audience) learn more about the mysterious aliens, which are so mysterious we never find out exactly where they came from.

Take out the aliens and the weird things associated with them, and what you have is a standard cop movie involving organized crime. Forty years ago, the same story (almost) could have been told with, say, a white cop and his new black partner. (In fact, I'm not so sure it wasn't.) The similarities between alien integration in the 1990's and black integration in the 1950's are strong: the humans are typically quite bigoted about their newcomer comrades, who live in their own ghetto called Slagtown ("slag" being a common derisive term the humans use...); the aliens keep to themselves most of the time, mostly because the humans don't want them around. (The common mentality is, "They're nice people, but I wouldn't want one next door.")

What could have made the difference in *Alien Nation* would be some great stuff involving the aliens. Having aliens walking among us (in Los Angeles, yet) has great potential for all sorts of interesting plot devices. However, the movie fails to live

up to that potential. The ads hint at the aliens having some deep dark secrets that they have not shared with their Earthling hosts, and some really bizarre, alien ways of life.

The ads promise too much. The aliens, when you get right down to it, are disturbingly ordinary. Okay, so they look funny, and they eat their food raw, and they get drunk on sour milk. Big deal. The alien make-up fails to work, so they end up looking like humans with some latex stretched over the tops of their heads and brown spots painted on it.

Newcomer society is also depressingly American: they get married, have kids, and go to work, just like humans. Even that deep, dark secret that Fransisco the alien wants to hide from his partner is nothing to get excited about. I was still waiting for more when the movie ended.

All in all, *Alien Nation* had the potential to be a real thriller of a science-fiction film. What it is, is a standard, predictable sci-fi flick that ultimately fails to deliver what it promises. What it really looked like, in fact, was a TV pilot movie; it had that quality of blandness to it. (I can see it now... a weekly TV series starring a human police detective and his alien partner. Sort of an interplanetary Cagney and Lacey. Yecch.)

Running recalls Vietnam


Running On Empty ***
Cineplex - Odeon
Eaton Centre, West Mall Cinemas

review by Alexandra Parr

Running On Empty is another film about the Vietnam War, but not quite what we have come to expect. It is actually a sensitive portrayal of a family feeling (and indirectly, living) the aftereffects of Vietnam.

After bombing a government-funded napalm laboratory 15 years earlier and accidentally injuring a janitor in the process, Arthur and Annie Pope (played by Judd Hirsch and Christine Lahti) are forced to choose between giving themselves up to the FBI and losing their son forever, or leading a life on the run and keeping the family together.

Running On Empty is about what happens after the Pops choose the latter. While the plausibility of the plot must be



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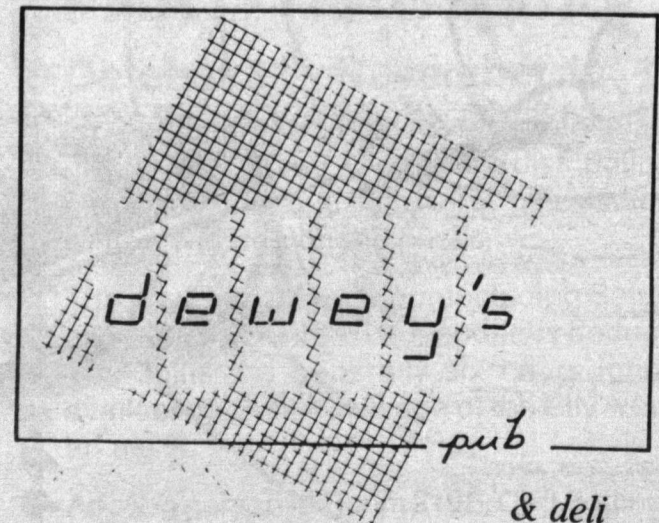
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