

# Hackman, Dafoe are G-men in new film

By Robert DiMatteo

## In Movie Theaters

**MISSISSIPPI BURNING (R)** Almost every year, there's a less-than-first-rate movie that wins great acclaim because it tackles a worthy subject (Gandhi, apartheid, etc.). This year it's director Alan Parker's classy-looking but manipulative treatment of the 1964 murder of three civil-rights workers by the Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi. In Parker's hands, the story becomes a typically contrived detective tale, with whites as heroes.

Those heroes are FBI men Gene Hackman and Willem Dafoe, contrasting types whose differing approaches to the murders form the movie's real kernel of drama. There's a variation on the standard buddy-movie conflict, graced by Hackman's excellent performance as a tough old Southern bird, and marred by Dafoe's

lackluster rendition of a slick, new-generation agent. (To play this bland-on-the-surface character, the daring Dafoe mistakenly dims his natural powers as an actor, hiding behind unattractive glasses.)

One of the movie's main conceits is the image of burning, of a small community being literally incinerated by racial conflict. But, characteristic of Parker's penchant for overstatement and sensationalism, we see more black churches being burned than even a city the size of Atlanta would have. And the way Hackman and Dafoe solve the case puts them on the level of no-pussyfooting-around Rambo, when the beauty of the civil rights movement was how it transcended such tactics.

In between clues, Hackman questions the town beautician (Frances McDormand), one of those plain, good-hearted movie wives who are always married to brutes — and who are put in movies like this to give ag-

ing stars (in this case Hackman) a love interest. **GRADE: ★★★**

**DANGEROUS LIAISONS (R)** The bold English director Stephen Frears helmed this creamy, crafty adaptation of Christopher Hampton's Broadway play — itself an adaptation of Choderlos de Laclos' scandalous 1794 novel about two vengeful aristocrats, former lovers, who spin webs of sexual intrigue in which they eventually become ensnared.

This is the most brittle and knowing kind of costume drama — the dialogue all nasty epigrams, the attitudes the height of archness. The material is sufficiently interesting for one to overlook a central piece of miscasting — John Malkovich, who is too modern, edgy and not sophisticated enough to be convincing as the rakish male lead.

Glenn Close co-stars, doing a period version of her sexy witch from "Fatal Attraction." Close has wonderful mo-

ments (including the long, eerie closing shot). But is it ungrateful to suggest that the Faye Dunaway of 10 years ago would have been even better?

Making her fourth movie appearance of the year, Michelle Pfeiffer is very good as the pure beauty whom Malkovich woos. All in all, this is a quietly compelling and erotic black comedy — one that doesn't, however, quite validate its tragic and bloody conclusion. **GRADE: ★★★**

## New Home Video

**YOUNG GUNS (R)** Vestron, \$89.98. Here's the first Brat Pack western — a minor event in cinematic history (though a surprising draw at the box office).

Partly based on the life of William "Billy the Kid" Bonney, and on the real-life Lincoln County (New Mexico) merchant wars, the movie succumbs to casting problems when it tries to market fledgling actors like Emilio Estevez (as Bonney), Kiefer Sutherland, Lou Diamond Phillips and Charlie Sheen in non-yuppie period roles. Some of the dusty atmosphere is diminished on video. **GRADE: ★★**

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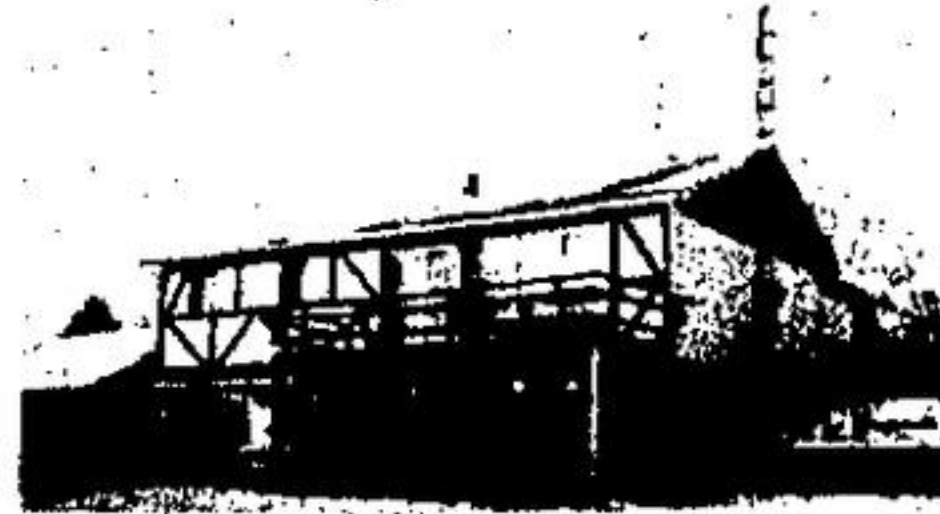
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