

Entertainment Outlook

Hanks is mired in unfunny 'Burbs'

FILMETER



ROBERT DIMATTEO

In Movie Theaters

THE 'BURBS (PG) After two excellent performances (in "Big" and "Punchline"), Tom Hanks has become one of those actors who singlehandedly makes a movie worth seeing — most of the time anyway. Even this inventive romantic comedian with the likably unimposing manner cannot make "The 'Burbs" worth our attention.

Like the oddball John Belushi film "Neighbors," this slapstick comedy starts from the premise that suburbia is less the haven for bland normality than for crackpot weirdness. Hanks plays a nice average guy who lives with his nice average wife (Carrie Fisher) and kids in the sort of cozy suburban community that many Americans consider heaven.

But wait a minute: Next door live three absolute nutsos (Henry Gibson, Brother Theodore and Courtney Gains). Spurred on by his nosy best buddy (Rick Ducommun), Hanks ends up spending his prized week-long vacation spying on these secretive and strange-looking folks — much to the chagrin of his wife and community.

As Hanks and Ducommun become embroiled in what they suspect to be foul play next door, the movie tries for a comically spooky what-if quality. What if, for example, the neighbors are really burying bodies in their back yard? And what do these folks do in the basement all the time?

With the quirky pop sensibility of director Joe Dante ("Gremlins") at the helm, one looks forward to some lively silliness. But the movie positively dies on the screen. The incessant slapstick is forced and noisy, and the central situation loses its interest

surprisingly quickly. After a while, you may find that you can barely keep your eyes focused on the screen. But the noise of people falling over each other trying to be funny keeps you all too awake. **GRADE: ★**

TAP (PG-13) The story of the great black hoofers of Harlem and Broadway is a fresh one for a major dramatic movie to tackle — even when it only serves as the backdrop for a throwback melodrama like this one. Here Gregory Hines plays an ex-con who returns to tap dancing after



TOM HANKS and Carrie Fisher star in "The 'Burbs," a new comedy about a couple whose suburban idyll is endangered by weird new neighbors.

squandering his talents as a burglar. This is Hines' first movie role that fully blends his gift for physicality with his goatish jazz-man's charm, and he's very enjoyable to watch — whether dancing up a storm or just etching in the character of a overgrown bad-boy trying to go straight.

Directed by Nick Castle Jr., the son of a movie choreographer, the film has the good sense to feature some great old tappers in supporting roles — Sandman Sims, Bunny Briggs, Harold Nicholas and Arthur Duncan among them. It's also got Sammy Davis Jr. doing a gruff/sentimental turn as the ailing but still spry dancer/father of Hines' ex-wife (Suzanne Douglas).

If only the movie weren't saddled with an antique plot that asks the hoary question: Can Hines give up his life of crime, redeem himself on the dance floor, and win back the heart of his former sweetheart?

Along the way, it glosses over the technological implications of the story — the way Hines decides to wire his taps electronically, turning tap into a kind of synthesized percussion. The picture suggests this is how to make tap relevant to today's rock audience, but is it?

Still, see "Tap" for the engaging energy of Hines, and for scenes like the one in a Times Square dance studio where all the old-timers challenge each other in a joyous demonstration of rhythmic feet. **GRADE: ★★½**

SHORT CIRCUIT 2 (PG) RCA/Columbia, \$89.95. A third-rate sequel to one of the top home video releases of 1987 — not that the original "Short Circuit" was much of a movie. The story again focuses on that mechanized E.T., the robot Johnny Five. Johnny comes to the aid of his inventor, malapropism-spouting East Indian scientist Ben Jaharvi (Fisher Stevens), now a high-tech toy maker. Corpulent Jack Weston plays the villain, Cynthia Gibb the love interest. It's all way too cute, and, at 110 minutes, way too long. **GRADE: ★**

MIDNIGHT RUN (R) MCA, \$89.95. Buddy action flicks seldom have the rich characters that this picture does. Robert DeNiro and Charles Grodin star as a Mutt and Jeff pair handcuffed together on a cross-country trip. The actors and the picture are fun. **GRADE: ★★★**

(Film grading: ★★★★★ — excellent, ★★★★ — good, ★★★ — fair, ★ — poor)

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OUR LANGUAGE

by Jeffrey McQuain

In ice hockey, slash illegally swings a stick at an opponent. Another player might make you angry, but never lash out with slash.

Gripe complains or grumbles. You'll have no gripe about spelling this word, once you have a grip on gripe.

Q. I can't figure out the word coroner. Where does it come from?

A. Coroner came into English by way of French from the Latin corona, "crown." When it entered Middle English, coroner meant "officer of the crown," an aide to royalty. Now, of course, its meaning is largely limited to the position of a public officer inquiring by inquest into any death apparently not of natural causes.

Do you have a question or comment about our language? Please write to Jeffrey McQuain, in care of this paper © 1989, NEWSPAPER ENTERPRISE ASSN.

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