

Jane Fonda stars in creaky movie "Old Gringo"

Entertainment

FILMETER



ROBERT DIMATTEO

In Movie Theaters

OLD GRINGO (R) Jane Fonda has spent too much of the last decade playing role models instead of roles. That tendency continues in this soggy, stilted historical romance adapted from a Carlos Fuentes novel in which the 51-year-old star plays — are you ready — a spinsterish governess in her mid-30s.

Trying to build a new life for herself, the governess goes to Mexico to work for a wealthy family, only to find that she has wandered into the middle of the Mexican Revolution. Also turning up is the real-life writer Ambrose Bierce (Gregory Peck), that great cynic who wrote "The Devil's Dictionary" and who actually spent his last days in Mexico.

According to the movie, Bierce is very attracted to the governess, but he's a bit long in the tooth to start a full-blown love affair. That isn't the case with a hot-blooded general (Jimmy Smits) in Pancho Villa's revolutionary army, who sweeps the governess off her feet. Spurred on by these two men, the woman awakens to new possibilities, loses her virginity to the general, and discovers her political consciousness.

No one awakens to politics the way Jane Fonda does. It's something she's done several times before — most memorably in "Coming Home." But her awakening here is corny. Perhaps inadvertently, this triangle story turns into one more old-fashioned romance in which a woman seems to fulfill herself through the love of men. So much for Fonda's much-vaunted feminism.

In almost every respect, the movie plays like a heavy, artsy, old-time epic. Throughout, the camera seems wowed by the sets, but the actors don't stand much of a chance. Smits smolders; sentimental favorite Peck wheezes a lot; and Fonda widens her eyes and quivers sensitively. The biggest loss is to the reputation of Ambrose Bierce, who comes across as a boozey geezer who tosses off aphorisms. **GRADE: ★½**

DRUGSTORE COWBOY (R) A startling surprise. Pacific Northwest-based filmmaker Gus Van Sant has come up with a low-budget triumph about young addicts who rob pharmacies to support their habits. It's a movie that flies in the face of much Bush era anti-drug rhetoric.

adopt. When he finally decides to go straight, Bob does so knowing that it probably means the end of his relationship with his wife (Kelly Lynch). She doesn't want to give up her drug-induced highs.

The controversial literary figure William Burroughs, himself a former junkie, plays a small role as an old addict/priest. With his eerie, gravelly voice and well-known unregenerate attitude about drugs, Burroughs is the right nihilistic presence to preside over this movie. He even offers what would seem to be the film's message:

as a means to curb other freedoms. Sounds familiar? **GRADE: ★★½**

New Home Video

EARTH GIRLS ARE EASY (PG) Vestron. Which creatures are more alien — a trio of furry extra-terrestrials (Jeff Goldblum, stand-up comics Jim Carrey and Damon Wayans) or Valley Girls Geena Davis and Julie Brown?

That's the implicit question behind this giddy, junk-sci-fi musical comedy from English director Julien Temple ("Absolute Beginners"). The aliens land in Davis's swimming pool, and

soon they're the toast (and bane) of Southern California.

The movie has an audacious, candy-colored quality, and it's studded with MTV-style musical numbers. The always offbeat Goldblum makes a better alien than Davis does a Valley Girl, yet this off-screen couple still manages to strike some sparks together on screen. The movie runs out of steam, though. **GRADE: ★★½**

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

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AMBROSE BIERCE (Gregory Peck) woos Harriet Winslow (Jane Fonda) in "Old Gringo," a movie based on the novel by Carlos Fuentes.

It's provocative, too — daring to suggest that people do drugs because drugs are fun, and because they want to relieve the pressures of everyday life (at least temporarily; self-destruction rather than relief comes later). As Bob (Matt Dillon), the leader of a gang of four robber/addicts, says to the head of a rehab program: "I like drugs. I like the whole lifestyle."

Yet in its funky, non-moralizing way, this is a very hard-hitting movie about drugs. The style is that of a deadpan black comedy, one with roots in the woody underground flicks that Andy Warhol and Paul Morrissey used to make, and with similarities to the fierce youth movie "River's Edge." Van Sant lets us share the habits of his junkies, even as those habits seem utterly depraved. The results of such a casual, lower-depths view are funny and disturbing.

Matt Dillon gives what may be his best performance to date as Bob, a fellow plagued by superstitions, but who isn't much bothered by the outlaw manner he and his partners

"Narcotics have been systematically scapegoated and demonized," he says, predicting that the extreme right will fan the flames of anti-drug hysteria

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