

# 'Stanley & Iris' is a blue-collar romance

## Entertainment

By Robert DiMatteo

In Movie Theaters

**STANLEY & IRIS (PG-13)** You want to root for a movie like this. Based on the novel "Union Street" by Pat Barker, it's a blue-collar romance about literacy — the story of Iris, a recently widowed bakery worker (Jane Fonda), who teaches a fellow employee, Stanley (Robert DeNiro), how to read. As the movie portrays the shame and fear of a grown man who can't write a check or even figure out which bus to take, it points to the power of words in our lives. In an age when fewer and fewer people read more than a magazine or two, the message is vital.

If only the movie were more vital. Despite a good cast and talented people behind the scenes, the film is anemic and somewhat patronizing — Hollywood liberals taking on the working-class. The movie is directed by Martin Ritt, whose "social problem" films have included goodies like "Sounder," "Norma Rae," "Conrack" and "Hud." However, his recent film, "Nuts," was tired, and that worn-out quality continues in "Stanley & Iris." Ritt and his collaborators have written a simplistic, sentimental screenplay.

DeNiro and Fonda, together for the first time, have the thankless task of trying to play Ordinary Working People. They do it by dimming their normal power as actors. In case we don't get just how ordinary they really are, the script italicizes it. "I'd take a new green Chevy if I could make the payments" is how the desire for nicer things gets expressed. Or, as Iris says: "I only have two sweaters."

DeNiro fares better than Fonda. His Stanley has a touching residual boyishness that seems to be the result of his illiteracy. However, again, certain things don't ring true. Iris discovers that Stanley can't read when she asks him to hand her a bottle of aspirin; since he can't read the labels, he doesn't know the difference between Tylenol and Sine-Aid. Surely, in 40 years, Stanley would have at least learned to identify the package design.

Forget the ease with which Stanley

finally learns to read. Forget the white picket fence that ostentatiously frames Iris' working-class house. But how can you forget the drama? These characters are too denatured for that. Holy smokes! Iris' worst habit is drinking coffee. **GRADE: ★★**

**STELLA (PG-13)** Back in 1937, the



**IRIS KING (Jane Fonda)** falls in love with Stanley Cox (Robert DeNiro), an illiterate blue-collar worker, in 'Stanley & Iris.'

late, great Barbara Stanwyck had one of her best roles as "Stella Dallas" — the brassy, self-sacrificing mother based on the lead character in Olive Higgins Prouty's book. Now, Bette Midler tries the role in an updated version for Disney.

The moviemakers must have thought you could take a story from one era and willy-nilly adapt it to another. After all, single mothers are still poor and struggling like Stella. But it's not that simple. The story depends upon specific attitudes about class, illegitimacy, sex and femininity that have changed drastically since

### FILMETER



**ROBERT DIMATTEO**

Why does Stella need to give up a grown girl? So that the movie can reproduce the famous tearjerker scene when she peers in the window of a shiny restaurant, sobbing away as her baby is married to a handsome, well-heeled WASP.

"Stella" provides a synthetic, cornball view of self-denying motherhood. Still, Midler is worth seeing in anything. **GRADE: ★★**

New Home Video

**LICENCE TO KILL (PG-13)** CBS/Fox. If you're a die-hard James Bond fan, this 1989 movie starring Timothy Dalton will probably be required viewing. On the other hand, it may offend you, because it's one of the lesser Bonds — an attempt to fit the suave 007 into the vengeful, "Lethal Weapon"/"Rambo" era. **GRADE: ★★**

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

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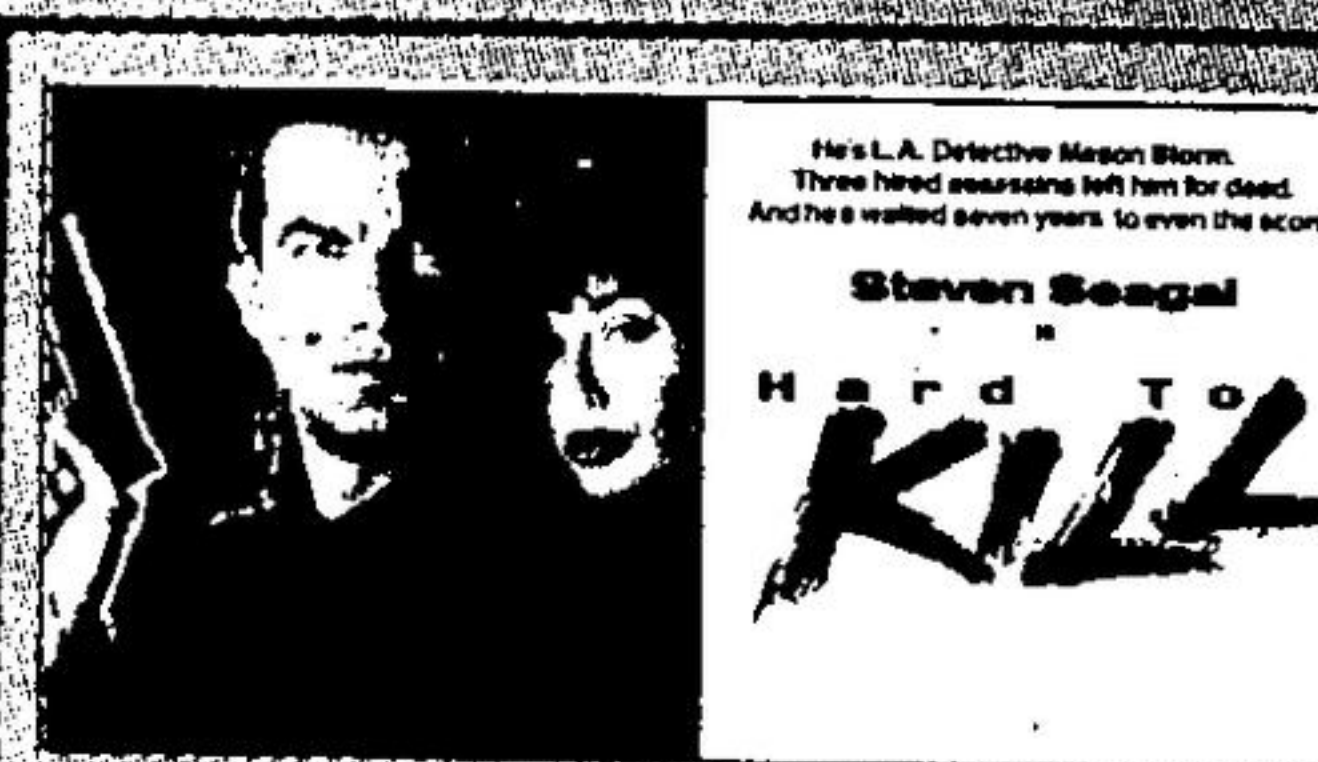
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