



ADAM ALEXI-MALLE (Afrim) is a uniquely gifted performer who has not only shown his versatility and talent as an actor, singer and writer, but also as an accomplished classical violinist and pianist performing throughout the world.

A New York City transplant from Siena, Italy, Alexi-Malle began performing at the age of 8. He studied violin, piano, dance and voice as a scholarship student at the Interlochen Arts Academy, and later attended The Juilliard School and The Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London. Earning a Bachelor's and Master's degree at the Universities of Wisconsin and Maryland, respectively, Alexi-Malle pursued postgraduate/doctoral studies at the Université de Paris/Paris Conservatoire as a Harriet Hale Woolley Fellowship scholar and at the Moscow State Conservatory in Russia.

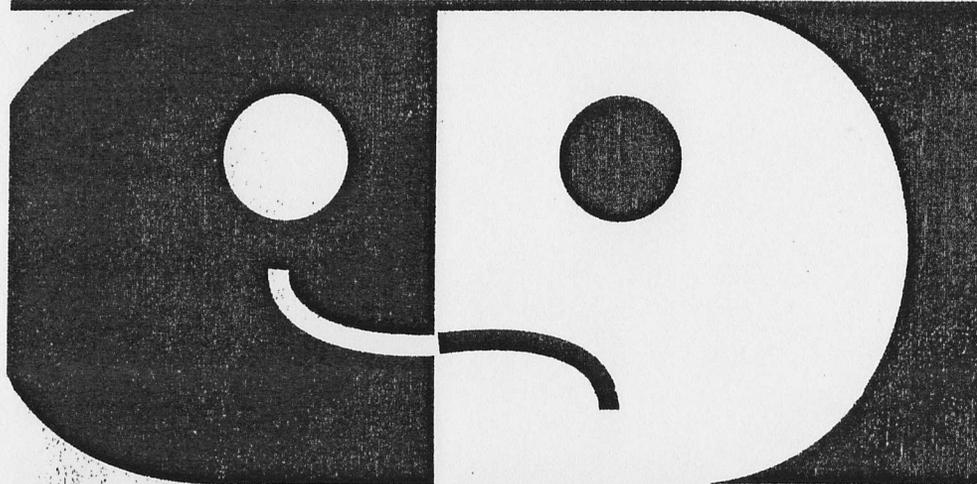
Alexi-Malle made his Broadway debut as an original cast member of the Tony award-winning musical *Titanic*. Following this stellar performance, he starred Off-Broadway in the American premiere of filmmaker Mike Leigh's (*Secrets and Lies*) play *Goose-Pimples* to unanimous critical and popular praise garnering nominations from the Outer Critics' Circle and Drama Desk Awards for his performance:

"inspired... splendid... simply astounding." *"pricelessly played"* wrote the *New York Times*; *"Too much cannot be said about the importance of Adam Alexi-Malle"*

"...riveting ..." *"...one exceptional performance..."* *"astoundingly funny"* resounded the *New York Post, Daily News, Newsday* and the *Boston Globe*.

He is actively involved in developing international film, television and performance projects with his production company, **Siena Films**, as well as in founding the first film repertory company, **Blistering Muses**.

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Marie Mullen (*The Beauty Queen of Leenane*)
J. Smith-Cameron (*As Bees in Honey Drown*)
Frances Sternhagen (*Long Day's Journey Into Night*)

The New York Times

Arts & Leisure

Sunday, January 11, 1998

Playing the Outsider and Feeling Right at Home

By STEVEN DRUKMAN

WHEN ADAM ALEXI-MALLE SAYS HE likes performing in Mike Leigh's dark comedy "Goose-Pimples" because it's "un-formula-ish," he hasn't chosen the word casually. This polyglot has many languages to choose from. "Let's see: I speak English, Italian, French, Spanish — all fluently," said the actor, 33, with candid directness about his abilities and no trace of an accent. "Russian, conversationally, because I studied in Moscow, and German — but if you study musicology, you must know some, of course." Of course.

Playing the piano, conducting and writing poetry are also part of the tally. And that doesn't include his chosen careers — so far — of actor and concert violinist.

When the New Group production of "Goose-Pimples" opened recently at the Judith Anderson Theater, Mr. Alexi-Malle won critical raves for his comic performance. Paradoxically, he plays Muhammad, a hapless Arab with restless brown eyes who spends his time gesticulating, smiling and speaking pidgin English.

Taken home by a female croupier (Caroline Seymour), who thinks he is an oil sheik and wants to show him off, Muhammad, for his part, is convinced he is at a brothel — and behaves accordingly. In a style that might be called farce noir, his hosts, genial racists, patronize him and then become even more hostile when it develops that he is not the Croesus they thought he was.

The production, which received glowing reviews, will close next Sunday and reopen Jan. 23 at the Intar Theater next door. It is the second time that the director, Scott Elliott, and the British writer have worked together. They last collaborated on the New Group's 1995 Off Broadway success, "Ecstasy." This time, Mr. Leigh, best known for his films "Secrets and Lies" and the recent "Career Girls," is depicting vulgar, striving London suburbanites — and the misplaced Muhammad — at the dawn of Thatcherism in 1981.

"Muhammad is the most sympathetic character,"

The actor-musician-linguist-immigrant Adam Alexi-Malle (now in 'Goose-Pimples') knows something about being different.

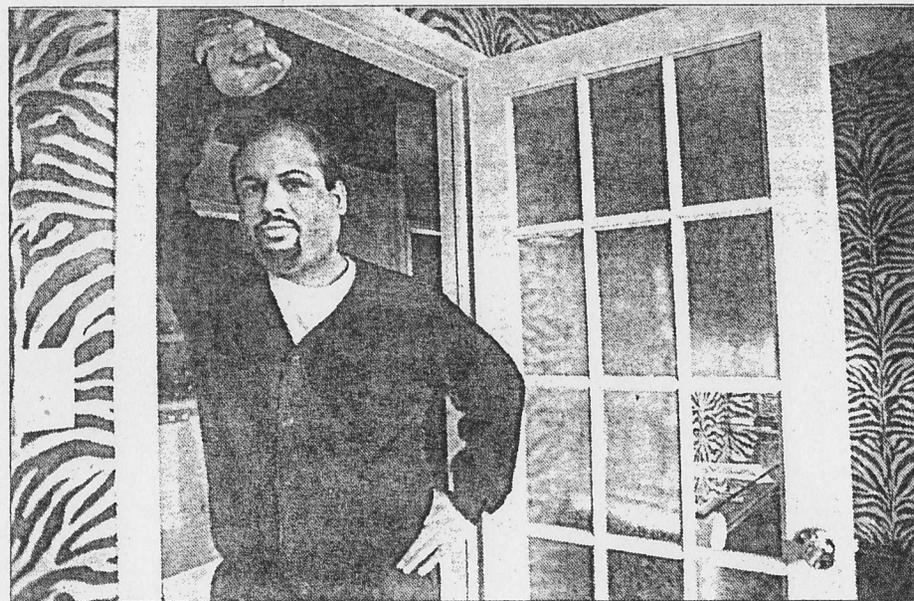
Mr. Alexi-Malle said. "But I identify with him because he's the outsider. His gestures could be seen as dismissive and offensive to the Brits, but I treat them as coming from a place of being out of place." He is familiar enough with a sense of being different to have adopted his stage name because, he said, he "doesn't want to be typecast as a certain ethnicity." He uses his real name, Juan-Paolo Perre, in the music world.

Born in Sienna, Italy, to an Italian father and a half-Spanish, half-Arab mother, Mr. Alexi-Malle came to America at the age of 8. At 9 he began piano studies in New York; by 11 he was performing as a soloist with orchestras. At 13, a full scholarship enabled him to attend the Interlochen Arts Academy in Michigan. "If my father had still been alive then, I might have gone to seminary," he said. "But my mother made a decision for me at that point: a life in the arts."

He has had to make many decisions since. His years in New York have included lessons in ballet, voice, film, piano and conducting. "But I still acted when I could," he said, and he has appeared on the television shows "Cosby" and "The Nanny."

After studying for a doctorate at the University of Paris, he resumed acting classes, first at the Moscow State Conservatory in 1993 and then at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London.

By 1994 he was back in New York, where he auditioned for the current Broadway musical "Titanic." Maury Yeston, who won a Tony Award for his score for



Philip Greenberg for The New York Times

AN ACTOR FIRST, FOR NOW Adam Alexi-Malle, who portrays an Arab in "Goose-Pimples," on the set.

the show, said about the audition: "Adam came in and played a Chopin nocturne. It was virtuosic. I thought, 'Are you here as an actor or musician?'"

Mr. Alexi-Malle also recalled that day: "I did my monologue, then I sang a Gershwin song. They seemed happy. Then I played the Chopin on the piano, and they really paid attention. So I played the Sibelius violin

concerto. Then, I think, they were shocked." He eventually landed a multi-character part.

Mr. Elliott cast him as Muhammad "because he had the right mixture of sweetness and sincerity. It was later that I found out he spoke all those languages and was a classical musician. There's a lot going on behind those eyes on stage — I just had no idea how much." □

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THEATER REVIEW

Nothing Nice to Say? Do Come Sit Closer!

By BEN BRANTLEY

All right, so maybe it is the season of office parties. And maybe the prospect of yet another evening with groggy, self-serving, randy materialists getting drunker and nastier by the minute isn't exactly what you had in mind as a holiday treat.

Nonetheless, you should try to squeeze into your social calendar the exquisitely sour little bash that's going on at the Judith Anderson Theater under the title of "Goose-Pimples." This ruthless portrait of ruthless people, written by the celebrated filmmaker Mike Leigh and dazzlingly directed by Scott Elliott, offers some of the most acutely observed performances to be seen this season. It's farce at its darkest and most organic: a comic collision of misunderstandings that bruises even at its silliest and that never seems merely mechanical.

The expert actors here, portraying four grasping London suburbanites and an unexpected visitor from foreign parts, never once try to win over the audience with charming, distancing winks at the shallow solipsists they portray. Not for a second do they demand that you root for them or even like them.

But that's precisely what makes "Goose-Pimples," a production of the vital young New Group, soar: the spectacle of people furiously butting their heads against the walls of their own small-mindedness, without ever pausing for a redemptive look at how badly they're behaving. The show has the precisely timed frenzy of a Jake Edwards movie, but minus the ipologetic cuteness or sentimentality. It's a reminder of what good company bad company can be, at least in theatrical terms.

In this 1981 play, there's scarcely a cent of the warmer, cuddlier whimsy that would later creep into the films of Mr. Leigh, the director of "High Hopes" and "Secrets and Lies." Although "Goose-Pimples" on the London Evening Standard ward for best comedy in its original production, it also had its share of and detractors, and it's not hard to see why.

A character named Muhammad played here by Adam Alexi-Malle and in London by Antony Sher), a audi businessman in search of a

Behaving badly,
in word, deed
and décor.

prostitute, drew the wrath of Muslims who saw the portrayal as insulting and morally depraved. But actually, Muhammad is the character who comes closest to being sympathetic in this take-no-prisoners satire, if for no other reason than that speaking no English, he can't be understood (a complication Mr. Alexi-Malle makes blissful comic hay of).

The others, despite their heavy working-class accents, are perfectly comprehensible, and what they say isn't pretty.

There's Vernon (Sam Rockwell), a car salesman and the house-proud owner of a deliciously tacky black-and-gold apartment (realized in lethal detail by the designer Kevin Price and matched by Eric Becker's costumes) and his lodger, Jackie (the wonderful Caroline Seymour), an ambitious casino croupier. Rounding out the group are Irving (Max Baker), Vernon's loutish fellow employee, and his wife, Frankie (Gillian Foss), a compulsive eater who is toxic with discontent.

These shabby-souled figures may have upwardly mobile ambitions, but you can't imagine they'll climb much higher than they have already. They're suckers of an economic system they don't understand except as a license for greed (Jackie is always spouting billboard versions of Thatcherite economic credos), and their creator isn't about to give them an even break. The blue-collar losers of Mr. Leigh's earlier "Ecstasy," memorably staged by Mr. Elliott for the New Group several seasons ago, seem huggable by comparison.

So why should we care about them? For the first 20 minutes or so of "Goose-Pimples," there's not much evidence that we will. True, watching Vernon prepare for a dinner party for Irving and Frankie (with whom, by the way, he's having an affair), setting out black place settings in his all-black leisure clothes to the strains of Rod Stewart's "Do Ya Think I'm Sexy," is amusing enough. Less so is the over-



Ruthless people: Gillian Foss, left, with Sam Rockwell, Adam Alexi-Malle, Caroline Seymour and Max Baker in Mike Leigh's "Goose-Pimples." Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

GOOSE-PIMPLES

By Mike Leigh; directed by Scott Elliott; set by Kevin Price; costumes by Eric Becker; lighting by Jan Kroeze; sound by Raymond D. Schilke; original music by Tom Kochan; production stage manager, John Harmon. Presented by the New Group, Scott Elliott, artistic director; Claudia Catania, executive producer; Lisa Goldsmith, managing director. At the Anderson Theater, 422 West 42d Street, Clinton.

WITH: Sam Rockwell (Vernon), Caroline Seymour (Jackie), Max Baker (Irving), Gillian Foss (Frankie) and Adam Alexi-Malle (Muhammad).

ile sex talk and brand-name dropping that occurs once Vernon's guests arrive. The tone seems to be one sustained sneer at people who are, after all, pitifully easy targets.

But while Mr. Leigh may not have invested his characters with much humanity, they are unmistakably, vibrantly human. And once Jackie returns to the flat with Muhammad, whom she has brought back from the casino with her, it becomes apparent

that Mr. Leigh is doing something very canny indeed with a classic farce formula: milking the comic potential of a language barrier in ways that are finally devastating.

Muhammad, whose command of English doesn't extend far beyond "taxi" and "O.K.," is under the impression that he has been taken to a brothel. Jackie, who is as naive as she is aggressive, believes Muhammad is a big-spending sheik who will introduce her to a world of fancy restaurants and glamorous jobs. The first-act scene that finds them alone together is a masterpiece of mutually misread intentions, a hilariously spastic conversation that never connects.

When Irving and his guests return from a restaurant (the steaks he had bought to cook for dinner turned out to be rancid), and make their own attempts at communicating with Muhammad, the play turns into a sort of fractured, protracted game of charades that brings out the beast in everyone. Social, political and sexual

surface. And it becomes painfully clear that, regardless of class or cultural origins, everyone here regards everyone else as an exploitable object.

Mr. Leigh pays homage to the conventions of farce, including a ridiculous set of entrance-complicating double doors. But Mr. Elliott, returning to the sort of inspired ensemble work he did for the New Group before making a shaky Broadway debut last season with "Present Laughter" and "Three Sisters," keeps the evening grounded in a sense of real time and physical immediacy.

There's not a gesture that isn't specifically motivated. And that these people aren't wind-up automatons in a comedy machine makes them funnier and far more frightening than characters in farce usually are. They may not be likable, but they're pathetically desperate and vulnerable, equally capable of wounding and being wounded.

The cast as a whole is splendid, even if Mr. Rockwell and Mr. Baker

ence. (Their parts are also the least interestingly written.) But Ms. Foss finds a poignant air of longing beneath Frankie's acerbic exterior.

And Mr. Alexi-Malle, whose hands and eyes are always restlessly searching for signals to explain Muhammad's incomprehensible surroundings, and Ms. Seymour, who conveys stupidity with subtly shaded intelligence, are simply astounding.

Theirs are the characters with the highest hopes for what the evening might offer, and to see those hopes stripped away is affecting in ways you wouldn't think this play could sustain. There is one glorious moment in the first act that finds Jackie spinning deliriously in a dance that Muhammad eagerly mistakes for foreplay.

They are both, in that instant, wrapped in shiny, enticing fantasies that are, of course, totally at odds with each other. That's as close to real happiness as anyone in "Goose-Pimples" is allowed to come.

A Riveting 'View From the Bridge'



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

THREE'S COMPANY Gillian Foss, left, Adam Alexi-Malle and Caroline Seymour in "Goose-Pimples."

'Goose-Pimples'

Mike Leigh's plays, like his films, are constructed as if they were elaborate gags: there's the long, carefully detailed buildup capped by a big, complex payoff scene that plays like a punch line, though it may be life-changing. Sometimes the scene is hilarious, sometimes ferocious. Occasionally, when the English writer-director is really in high gear, it's both hilarious and ferocious.

This is more or less the method of "Goose-Pimples," Mr. Leigh's 1981 play at the Judith Anderson Theater in an impeccable New Group production staged by Scott Elliott, its artistic director. The suburban London setting is a bachelor pad of supremely tacky lower-middle-class chic shared by Vernon, a young automobile salesman, and his roomer, Jackie, a pretty, utterly humorless peroxide-blond croupier.

While Vernon is out wining and dining his office pal Irving and Irving's wife, Frankie (with whom Vernon is having an affair), Jackie returns to the flat with Muhammad, whom she has just met at her club and who speaks virtually no English. Muhammad is a neat, portly fellow who would seem to sweat a lot.

Jackie has somehow got it into her tiny mind that Muhammad, a small-

time Saudi businessman, is really a rich-as-Croesus oil sheik, her introduction to the jet set. He believes Jackie to be a whore and the flat a brothel. They are both all smiles and on-the-make with different goals in mind. Enter Vernon, accompanied by Irving and Frankie. The result is an extremely (if meanly) funny punchline scene in which the misunderstandings and resentments leave everyone bereft, with poor Muhammad drunkenly sick as well.

What happens in the play isn't as important as how it happens, which is where the excellent cast comes in. Caroline Seymour, so good in Mr. Elliott's earlier New Group production of Mr. Leigh's "Ecstasy," is delectably dense as the ambitious Jackie, not having a clue as to why the libidinous Muhammad is showering her with pound notes. Muhammad, as pricelessly played by Adam Alexi-Malle, can barely catch his breath in his eagerness for joys that keep eluding him. Meanwhile, Vernon (Sam

Rockwell) seethes as Muhammad mistakes him for a bartender, Frankie (Gillian Foss) keeps trying to get Vernon alone, and Irving (Max Baker) keeps horing them all.

Before everything ends in frustration there is one hugely funny tableau: Muhammad, sitting on the couch, sandwiched between Jackie and Frankie, his eyes darting from

one woman to the other as anticipation and puzzlement alternately flash across his face. The actor is so expressive that the image stays in the memory as if it had been a movie closeup.

Though the text might be profitably cut — the buildup goes on too long — the production is a model of comic collaboration. □

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The New York Times

Mike Leigh's Other Life as a Playwright

By RICK LYMAN

THE OFFICES OF MIKE Leigh's Thin Man Productions are next to a pub in a venerable, if threadbare, building on the edge of the West End. "Don't go further upstairs," he warns from the second-floor landing outside his office. "It's a brothel." (Sure enough, there is a handwritten sign affixed to the stairwell reading "French Models," with an arrow pointing up.)

The acclaimed film director ("Secrets and Lies," "Naked," "High Hopes," the recent "Career Girls" and others) is not as well known in America as a playwright, though much of his work in England over the years has been on the stage. Even in Britain, Mr. Leigh is better known for his movies and he is fondly remembered by viewers for the many television films he did for the BBC in the mid- to late 1970's.

Mr. Leigh brings to the stage the same idiosyncratic style and intensely collaborative way of working that underpin his films, in which scripts grow and characters emerge during a lengthy, improvisational rehearsal process.

Part of the reason his plays are little known in America is that only four of them ever got published.

"For years and years, I did lots of plays, but after the last performance they just evaporated, basically," he said. "It's the nature of the way I work, so collaboratively with the actors. I just thought, Why write it down? But people kept asking me, 'Why don't you publish them?' So I yielded to pressure and people have done the plays, to death sometimes."

One of them, "Ecstasy," was a major Off Broadway success for the New Group two seasons ago under the direction of Scott Elliott. Now, Mr. Elliott is staging another of Mr. Leigh's plays, "Goose Pimples," at the Judith Anderson Theater on Theater Row in New York, where it opens on Thursday.

"I've been very careful about who I allow to do these plays, especially 'Ecstasy,' which is very real and gritty and needs to be done just right," Mr. Leigh said. "But when Scott Elliott started talking about the



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

CLIMBERS Gillian Foss, left, Adam Alexi-Malle and Caroline Seymour in "Goose Pimples."

the original production.

Both "Ecstasy" and "Goose Pimples" are set among characters in Britain's working class, though in "Goose Pimples" the characters have landed higher-paying jobs and are trying to push their way into the middle class. And it is much more a broad farce than the naturalistic "Ecstasy," complete with door-slamming, mistaken identity and sexual undertones.

In it, a young woman in the money-mad early 1980's brings a non-English-speaking Arab to an apartment in which she rents a room. He is a sheep farmer who she thinks is an oil sheik. The Arab, meanwhile, believes that the woman is a prostitute and the apartment a brothel.

"I think 'Goose Pimples' is a tougher play for Scott to do than 'Ecstasy' was," Mr. Leigh said. "Its milieu is very specific, about the early days of Thatcher, and the characters in it are very specific types from that period in England." Plus, he said, it is a play about racism, a subject with different resonances in Britain and the United States.

Mr. Elliott disagrees. "Nouveau riche is nouveau riche," he said. "It's universal."

THE PLAYWRIGHT DESCRIBED "Goose Pimples" as an "anti-farce." "In an ordinary farce," he said, "the situation spins out of control and then resolves itself at the end.

"In this play, the situation becomes more and more confusing. Everything gets worse until the end, when they've just completely gone haywire and that's the end."

Now that his film career is on such a solid footing, Mr. Leigh said he does not foresee returning to stage work anytime soon.

"For me, these days, film is glorious and consuming and what it's all about," he said. "A play has to be pretty damn exciting to raise my interest. I love theater, but it doesn't really reach the people I want to reach. It's exactly the kind of people who don't go to theater that I want to reach."

A farce by Britain's master of collaborative films will be seen Off Broadway, where he had a hit in 1995.

reassured that he would do it correctly. And when the play took off in New York, it was quite overwhelming."

Like most Americans, Mr. Elliott said he came to Mr. Leigh's work through his films. "I didn't even know he was a playwright," said Mr. Elliott, the artistic director of the New Group. "I was a big fan of the movies and I really appreciated the style of acting and the attention to detail and the intricacies of the subtexts. But it wasn't until I saw a videotape of one of his plays that I realized he was a playwright too."

Mr. Leigh, 54, is a bit professorial in his demeanor and dress, with the sharply sloped shoulders and bent neck of a man

nothing whatever like the rough-hewn, scrabbling, working-class characters who populate much of his work. He seated himself in a plush chair at one end of his dimly lighted office, dark with knotty pine, his salt-and-pepper beard surrounding a wan smile.

There was little adornment in the office: pictures of some of his past productions, stage and screen, a movie poster, a small neat desk and, in a far corner, a small television. The busy noise of Soho pushed insistently at the shade-drawn windows.

Rather than presenting actors with a finished script, Mr. Leigh builds texts and characters during a long brainstorming period with the actors. They sit and talk, for hours, sometimes days, fleshing out the characters' life stories. Then, he puts actors playing different characters together and they go through improvised scenes. Sometimes he hurls surprise plot developments at them in the middle of scenes, to see how they react. Only at the end does anything resembling a plot or a script take shape.

That was one reason he was so reluctant to have his plays printed, he said. He never felt they were his alone. Indeed, he said, he still shares half the royalties on any revival

Sunday, December 14, 1997

Arts & Leisure

The New York Times

'Goose-Pimples' lays bare '70s excess

NEW YORK — Playwright and filmmaker Mike Leigh (*Naked, Secrets & Lies*) has become an off-Broadway cottage industry, with plays old and new being produced by the New Group, headed by hot young director Scott Elliott.

The latest entry is *Goose-Pimples*, a portrayal of garrulous suburban Londoners in the libidinous 1970s. Written in 1981, it's perhaps more powerful now than when it was new (★★★½ out of four).

The casual sex, recreational drunkenness and chain smoking so fashionable in the '70s now seem far less savory, particularly intermingled with the vapid conversation and mirthless laughter in this story of three men and two women seeking foolish, cruel weekend fun.

They rarely consider consequences. The men blithely degrade women and are truly nasty to an Arab businessman who mistakes their apartment for a brothel.

He becomes a blank page on which the others project their

Stage Review

By David Patrick Stearns

dreams and bigotry. None-too-bright casino worker Jackie (Caroline Seymour) thinks he's a wealthy shipping magnate when he's actually an animal trader. To foul-mouthed, unhappily married Irving (Max Baker), he's merely an unwanted foreigner. While the play can be tedious — the

characters are so slow to understand each other — it has an insinuating power.

Elliott's direction pushes the actors to the bearable limits of abrasiveness with memorable results.

Best of all is Adam Alexi-Malle, whose performance as the Arab is the play's main source of counterpoint: Amid the complex motivations swirling around him, he projects only a modest desire to have sex.

Gilli Foss, Sam Rockwell, Adam Alexi-Malle and Caroline Seymour, from left, provide sauce for the "Goose."

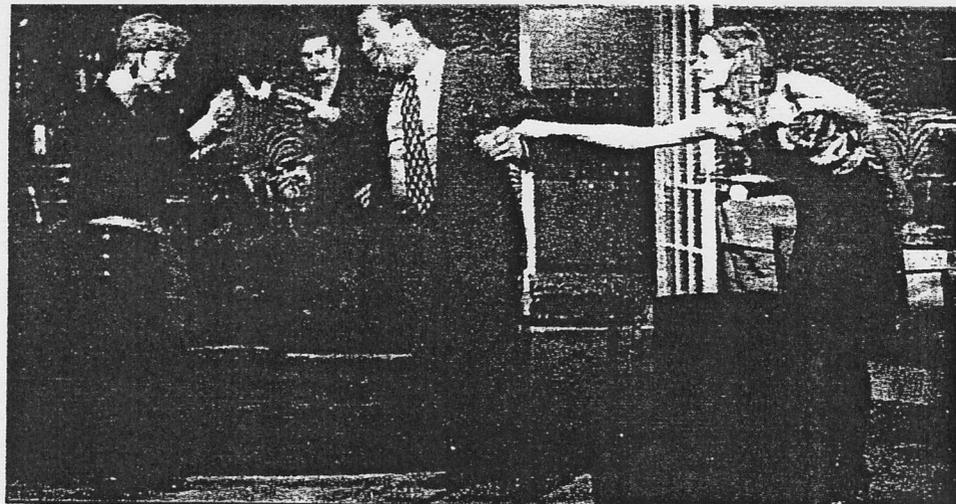


Photo by Carol Rosegg

A Working Class Act

Chilling comedy raises 'Goose-Pimples'

REVIEW

GOOSE-PIMPLES. By Mike Leigh, directed by Scott Elliott. The New Group, Judith Anderson Theatre, 42nd Street west of Ninth Avenue, Manhattan. Seen at Monday's preview.

By Linda Winer
STAFF WRITER

WHEN THE CAR SALESMAN with the gold necklace sings along with Rod Stewart's "Do You Think I'm Sexy?" while tidying his fake leopard-skin rug — and nobody but the audience laughs — we assume we're in cartoon social-wanna-be land. When the lanky blond dish with the wrinkled black nylons pleads, "Put some Barry Manilow on" — and nobody sneers but us — we think we're in that place where satire is easy and audiences are given permission to feel superior to the pathetic strivers on the stage.

But it would be a mistake — a big mistake — to get too comfy and smug about the targets in "Goose-Pimples," which the always adventurous New Group opened last night at the Judith Anderson Theatre. The bright yet preciously chilling 1981 comedy is by Mike Leigh, the English filmmaker ("Secrets & Lies," "Naked," "Life Is Sweet"), whose detailed observations of London's working class have managed to touch broad international audiences with their layered understanding of complex humanity.

There is flesh-raising cruelty, for sure, in the play's farcical depiction of working stiff who bought the upward-mobility package of the early Thatcher years. But Leigh's knowing blade cuts beyond his victims to the values that have trickled down to them. Ultimately, there is a sad, almost tender compassion for all the world's poor fools who covet the trendy accoutrements of the powerful, without a chance at real satisfaction.

Two years ago, the New Group and artistic director Scott Elliott had their first big success with Leigh's "Ecstasy," a gritty, erotic snapshot of mixed emotions that taught New York theatergoers that Leigh was a prolific playwright long before his movies made him famous. Elliott, last year's director flavor of the month, then ventured to Broadway with underappreciat-

Back with his own Off-Broadway group at the scene of the climb, he seems unscathed by the commercial battering and at the top of his game in another darkly naturalistic, edgy Leigh discovery. The company muse, the tough, sexy and funny Caroline Seymour, is also back, after a more conventional outing in "Present Laughter." This seems right.

Seymour plays Jackie, a small-time croupier who rents a room in the laughably swinging pad in a London suburb where blue-collar workers move when they're moving on up. The flat belongs to Vernon, a would-be yuppie car salesman — he sells little Metros — and is lovingly over-decorated by Kevin Price with screaming zebra wallpaper, a black faux-leather couch, a self-important bar and what Vernon calls his "music center."

While Vernon is being fleeced at a restaurant by his fellow macho-geeky salesman (played with a Pinteresque sense of squalor by Max Baker) and the bitter wife with whom Vernon is having an affair (the deftly droll Gillian Foss), Jackie hopefully brings home a Saudi named Muhammad, who speaks almost no English. She thinks he's an oil sheik who will change her life. He thinks he's in a brothel.

That Elliott and company find this kind of humor in such seemingly tired farce conventions as slamming doors, uppity commoners and language-identity miscommunications is surprising. That they manage to make us feel both guilty laughing at the characters and moved by their racism and their aged opinions of unions is even more impressive.

Too much cannot be said about the importance of Adam Alexi-Malle, an Italian-born, internationally trained actor who plays Muhammad with a startling combination of befuddlement and imperiousness. Speaking for the most part in what seems to be idiomatic Arabic, Alexi-Malle keeps making us reassess the would-be sheik's sense of himself in this increasingly chaotic and dangerous situation.

Eric Becker's costumes convey a lovely juxtaposition of ridicule and authenticity, as does everything else in this vicious but empathetic production. Leigh used to create his plays collectively through improvisation, and shares royalties from revivals with the original casts.

Living Arts

THE BOSTON GLOBE • TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 1998

'Goose-Pimples'

The characters in Mike Leigh's 1980s play, "Goose-Pimples," may be the most unsympathetic he has created. Known more for movies like "Secrets and Lies," Leigh is something of a British champion of working-class strivings. It's somewhat

shocking, then, to see five characters in search of any redeeming value, parade their polyester materialism around the New Group stage for the first half of "Goose-Pimples." The two car salesmen, a wife, and a female boarder are as stupid as they are coarse, racist, and

tasteless. When the boarder brings an Arab tourist back to the vulgar, Vegas-like, leopard-skin, leather-upholstered flat, the fun really begins, particularly since neither speaks the other's language.

Why is Leigh having such a good time at their expense? And it is a relentlessly good time, as their mood swings go from swooning over Barry Manilow to Archie Bunkerish race baiting to endless preening and groping.

It won't come as any surprise to those who've seen Leigh's movies that the real target here isn't the five characters, but the soulless greed and materialism of Margaret Thatcher's England. As the overview comes into focus, the comedy moves from sadistic slapstick to social satire. Their hankering for a Rod Stewart "Do Ya Think I'm Sexy" love life and a high-rolling financial windfall are a trap, not a path to happiness. As one of the characters comes to realize the trap they're in, their plight is almost as tragic as Eddie Carbone's

the New Group who also directed Leigh's "Ecstasy" here and Miller's "The Ride Down Mt. Morgan" at Williamstown, keeps the action at a fever pitch. Three of the four British characters were born in England before settling in the States, enabling Elliott to circumvent union problems and still have people who speak Leigh's language. Caroline Seymour is the star of the quartet, particularly when she combines with Adam Alexi-Malle, astoundingly funny and sympathetic as the Arab tourist. (You may have seen him in the original cast of "Titanic.")

Someone at the club where Seymour works asked her to take him home to meet her friends; he thinks the two women are prostitutes and the men their attendants. As the second act becomes less assaultive (although audiences could have a class-action suit for second-hand smoke), the British characters show their stripes. They are, for example, all anti-union, rejecting a real possibility of social change in exchange for becoming the British equivalent of Reagan Democrats. That, and what it implies in terms of material vs. group values, is their undoing.

Is Leigh convincing? Not fully. But by sucking us in, by making us think that we're laughing at these characters, the joke may ultimately be on us.

...

OFF BROADWAY

GOOSE-PIMPLES

NEW YORK A New Group presentation of play in two acts by Mike Leigh. Directed by Scott Elliott. Set, Kevin Price; costumes, Eric Becker; lighting, Jan Kroeze; sound, Raymond D. Schilke; music, Tom Kochan; stage manager, John Harmon. Artistic director, Elliott. Opened Dec. 18, 1997, at the Judith Anderson Theater. Reviewed Dec. 16; 95 seats; \$30 top. Running time: 2 HOURS, 15 MIN.

Cast: Sam Rockwell (Vernon), Caroline Seymour (Jackie), Max Baker (Irving), Gillian Foss (Frankie), Adam Alexi-Malle (Muhammad).

By ROBERT L. DANIELS

Mike Leigh's fiercely comic "Goose-Pimples" abounds in non-sequiturs, warped logic and sexual innuendo. With the menacing undercurrent of a dinner party gone sour, the farce (written in 1981, 15 years before the playwright had his mass-audience film breakthrough with "Secrets & Lies") reveals Leigh's dark and daunting edge.

The actors skillfully spew a barrage of abrasive exchanges and engage in some raucous knockabout physical encounters. Story is set in a London suburb in the early 1980s, when the ambitious working-class car salesman and confirmed bachelor Vernon (Sam Rockwell) invites nerdish colleague Irving (Max Baker) and his sexually charged wife, Frankie (Gillian Foss), over for a quiet dinner. When the steaks in the fridge are discovered to be spoiled, the trio opts to eat out.

Enter Vernon's lodger, Jackie (Caroline Seymour), a somewhat ditsy and very naive Soho gambling croupier, who brings home a man she mistakenly believes is a Middle Eastern oil sheik. The non-English-speaking Muhammad (Adam Alexi-Malle) is in reality a sheep farmer who thinks he has been brought to a brothel. When Vernon and his guests return, the attempt to communicate with the perplexed Arab turns small talk into a hilarious game of charades.

Various infidelities and miscommunications lead to an explosive melee fueled by irreverent humor that can best be described in current terms as politically incorrect.

Alexi-Malle superbly fuses expressive body language and fractured English into some very funny business as the misplaced foreigner. Baker's absurdly conceited swagger and incessant cackling defines Irving as a world-class loser, and Seymour adds a sweet vulnerability to the susceptible Jackie.

Leigh's play is a neatly structured romp, and director Scott Elliott has braced it with a frantic pace that explodes with sudden fury (the playwright and director last collaborated on the acclaimed "Ecstasy"). Kevin Price's bachelor-pad set, with its seductive leopard-skin colors, is properly plush and tasteless.

CRITIC AT



LEISURE

By ARLENE EPSTEIN

TOUGH THEATRE, TERRIFIC PERFORMANCES

Some years ago, at a Broadway musical, we were introduced to a man who said, "I never go to see dramas. If I want to be depressed I can stay home." How wrong he was. The bleak content of much of the theater we've seen recently has provided some of the most electric and exhilarating moments in a quarter-century of reviewing.

If you can beg or steal a ticket to "Mojo,"- go. We came late to Jez Butterworth's slam-bang theater noir, put off by word of its profanity and physical violence.

Once we got the hang of the accents and jargon particular to a half-dozen denizens of a seedy Soho (London) nightclub, circa 1958, we were caught up in a compressed equivalent of "Pulp Fiction" and "Get Shorty" that could only happen in live theater.

Enter the world of "Mojo," or more specifically the dead-end degraded lives of Sweets (Patrick Fitzgerald), Potts (Matthew Ross), Baby (Clark Gregg), Skinny (Chris Bauer), Mickey (Jordan Lage) and Silver Johnny (Joseph Kern), and you'll begin to feel like you've popped a handful of their little white diet pills.



Max Baker, Gilli Foss, Adam Alexi-Malle, Caroline Seymour and Sam Rockwell in a scene from The New Group production of Mike Leigh's "Goose Pimples" at the Judith Anderson Theatre.

A silver jacket, a blue birthday cake, a juke box and a dead body are all the props director Neil Pepe needs to convey lives with no exit. Like flies in a bottle, he keeps his cast in constant motion without progress as they try to make deals, make trouble, survive.

The most satisfying moments of

"Mojo" come in the evening's final scene. The only clue we'll divulge is that the nightclub owner's son Baby, a semi-vacant go-fer, proves to be "mad only north-by-northwest." Clark Gregg is terrific in a creepy but appealing award-worthy performance, with kudos to a cast that made us feel we'd taken a punch in the ribs and come up smiling.

We hope "Mojo," due to close Jan. 17 can find another home. If you could harness the energy onstage at the Atlantic Theater Company you could put the lights back on in Maine. (Tickets at 212-239-6200. 336 W. 2th St.)

"I'm not interested in creating theater that invariably I find polite with no sort of amusement or revelation," director Scott Elliot has been quoted to say. He sticks to his word in the New Group's revival of "Goose Pimples," Mike Leigh's unrelenting black 1981 comedy about a quartet of working class Brits whose upward mobility has led them to break out in a rash of nouveau-riche.

Vernon (Sam Rockwell), a car salesman, his lodger, dimwitted Jackie, a nightclub hostess (excellent Caroline Seymour), Irving (Max Baer), Vernon's friend and co-worker and his wife, Frankie (Gillian Foss) have gathered at the former's boxy London

flat for a dinner party. They are right at home in Kevin Price's dated set with its chrome bar stools, black leather couch, faux tiger walls and leopard rug. Rod Stewart is on the stereo, the drink of choice is Scotch and water. To supply a current of tension, Vernon and Frankie are having an affair. The second-hand smoke from their nervously puffed cigarettes could inspire a lawsuit.

The catalyst for disaster arrives in comic innocence when Jackie brings Mohammed (Adam Alexi-Malli) home from work. She's mistaken the dapper visiting Arab sheep farmer for a millionaire sheik. Mohammed thinks Jackie is a prostitute- and Vernon's flat is her brothel. The evening's ensuing debacle might seem funny to some. We were never less than uncomfortable, and by evening's end actually queasy, as the action onstage turned from door-slaming farce to ugly hands-on racism.

Every season there are a handful of performances that become a part of theater legend. Adam Alexi-Malle's turn as bemused, bewildered, sweating and finally terrified Muhammed is among them. When the actor wakes, after vomiting (yes, onstage) and passing out from the liquor that's been forced upon him, his metamorphosis from a man out for a night on the town to a hapless survivor in hell evoked T.S. Eliot: "This is the way the world ends...Not with a bang but with a whimper."

We can't say we enjoyed Mike Leigh's play, but we can't forget it. With tight direction and a fine cast, it certainly did its job. It gave us goose pimples.

(Tickets at 212-279-4200)

Variety
May 21, 2001

THE MAN WHO WASN'T THERE.(Review) / (movie review)
Author/s: Todd Mccarthy

A USA Films (in U.S.) release of a Working Title production. (International sales: Good Machine Intl., N.Y.) Produced by Ethan Coen. Executive producers, Tim Bevan, Eric Fellner. Co-producer, John Cameron.

Directed by Joel Coen. Screenplay, Joel Coen, Ethan Coen. Camera (Deluxe B&W), Roger Deakins; editors, Roderick Jaynes, Tricia Cooke; music, Carter Burwell; production designer, Dennis Gassner; art director, Chris Gorak; set designer, Jeff Markwith; set decorator, Chris Spellman; costume designer, Mary Zophres; sound (Dolby Digital/DTS/SDDS), Peter Kurland; supervising sound editor, Skip Lievsay; associate producer, Robert Graf; assistant director, Betsy Magruder; casting, Ellen Chenoweth. Reviewed at Cannes Film Festival (competing), May 13, 2001. Running time: 116 MIN.

Ed Crane	Billy Bob Thornton
Doris Crane	Frances McDormand
Frank	Michael Badalucco
Big Dave	James Gandolfini
Ann	
Nirdlinger	Katherine Borowitz
Creighton Tolliver	Jon Polito
Birdy Abundas	Scarlett Johansson
Walter Abundas	Richard Jenkins
Freddy	
Riedenschneider	Tony Shalhoub
Carcanogues	Adam Alexi-Malle

'MAN' CUTS HAIRY TALE

The Coen brothers tread into James M. Cain territory with "The Man Who Wasn't There," but with less tasty results than either Cain or the Coens themselves at their best. Shooting in delicious black-and-white but papering over most of the central incident with incessant voiceover narration, the always inventive team tells a typically noirish tale of adultery, blackmail and murder at a dramatic remove, and with an aptly named title character who sets new standards for opaqueness and passivity. The otherwise beautifully made picture is one of the Coens' second-tier efforts artistically and commercially.

Evocatively set in small-town Santa Rosa, Calif. (the scene of Alfred Hitchcock's "Shadow of a Doubt") in 1949, pic has all the ingredients at hand for an enticing film noir. It's the way the Coens have decided to tell their story, however, that uncommonly mutes the action and saps it of its potential heat and tension; the viewer is largely told about what happens rather than being shown. Tactic has the effect of all but eliminating scenes of dramatic confrontation, makes the yarn's dramatic twists less surprising and seriously curtails the opportunities for the Coens to play to their habitual and most reliable strength -- snappy, wildly imaginative regional and period dialogue.

Roughly assuming the role of one of Cain's milquetoast fall guys, Billy Bob Thornton is Ed Crane, a gray-looking, closed-mouth barber who cuts hair alongside his brother-in-law, Frank (Michael Badalucco), an expansive fellow who owns the shop and does most of the talking therein. When a chatty stranger in for a trim named Creighton Tolliver (Jon Polito, recalling Akim Tamiroff right down to his toupee) mentions a hot business opportunity in dry-cleaning for which he needs a \$10,000 investment, Ed decides to try to change his uneventful lot in life by blackmailing Big Dave (James Gandolfini), whom Ed knows is having an affair with his wife, Doris (Frances McDormand).

... of the story unveils the fateful ways in which Ed's move affects others' lives. Big Dave is sure that he'll be thrown out of his marriage and lucrative position running his wife's department store if his infidelity is revealed. Thus he pays the 10 Gs, which he believes have been demanded by Tolliver, who also approached him about the investment. When Big Dave learns that the extortionist is actually Ed, he goes on the attack in the film's only forcefully presented scene of action and violence -- with sorry results for him.

The nifty twist at the beginning of act two has Doris, who doesn't even yet know that her husband is wise to her philandering, arrested and charged with Big Dave's murder; Doris, it turns out, has been helping her lover "cook the books" at the department store, and Ed takes the extreme measure of hiring the best lawyer in Northern California, Freddy Riedenschneider (Tony Shalhoub), to try to save his wife from the chair. To finance Freddy's extravagant ways, however, Frank has to sign the barber shop over to the bank, one of the many unanticipated domino effects that Ed's ill-advised investment decision has around town.

Without revealing much more, it can be said that there are at least two more unanticipated deaths (both off-screen), a gradual awakening of emotion in Ed that at last prompts a degree of enthusiasm in this most taciturn of men and a demonstration that the long arm of the law can reach out in highly ironic ways, as an odd late-in-the-game detour of not inconsiderable charm takes the tale directly into terrain mapped by Cain in "The Postman Always Rings Twice."

The film holds the interest, to be sure, but more due to the sure sense of craft and precise effect that one expects from the Coens than from genuine involvement in the story. There are some lovely poetic moments -- Ed finding neighborhood teenager Birdy (Scarlett Johansson, much grown since "The Horse Whisperer" and very good) quietly playing Beethoven on a grand piano on the mezzanine during a department store Christmas party, humorous haircut montages (the Coens got the idea for this film from a haircut poster on the set of "The Hudsucker Proxy") and a succession of dome and disc motifs that playfully link images of imprisonment, physical peril and, of all things, extraterrestrial visitation.

But Ed's mostly inert physical presence and all-but-continuous flow of narration make the tale proceed at what seems like three-quarters speed, a sensation compounded by Ed's acknowledged self-image as "a ghost" and the wide, spread use of slowish Beethoven piano sonatas as musical background. If anyone today might have been thought capable of writing brilliant pulp narration, it would have been the Coens, but the prose has a damp, tapped-down quality that's neither very colloquial nor especially engaging.

Wearing a waved salt-and-pepper toupee and spending much of his screen time smoking in repose while his v.o. does the narrative work, Thornton is quiet, watchful and thoughtful, even if his character finally reveals himself to be no brighter than he seemed at the outset. McDormand has precious little to do as the straying wife who doesn't mind having to do all the talking in the family, while Gandolfini has an outstanding scene of comic distress as he confesses his own indiscretions to Ed. Badalucco, Polito, Shalhoub and Adam Alexi-Malle, the latter in one nifty scene as a piano teacher with a grand sense of style, punch over their roles in a very welcome manner.

Regular Coens lenser Roger Deakins makes the most of a rare opportunity to shoot in black-and-white, combining with Dennis Gassner's production design, Mary Zophres' costumes and an astutely selected combo of Southern California locations to create a superior post-war, small-town period feel.

The Man Who Wasn't There

★★★★

By Michael Wilmington

Get theaters and showtimes for this movie

"The Man Who Wasn't There" is a film noir for devotees. This latest picture by moviemaking aces Joel and Ethan Coen should appeal mightily to anyone who likes the classic old American crime story: the crisp, smart, brutal storytelling in the novels of James M. Cain, Dashiell Hammett and Jim Thompson, or in vintage '40s thrillers like **"Double Indemnity," "Detour"** or **"Out of the Past."**

Cain is the main model here. Like his novels **"Double Indemnity"** and **"The Postman Always Rings Twice,"** this is the story of an ordinary guy who becomes ensnared in evil and crime. Set in 1949 in Santa Rosa, Calif. — which was also the site of Alfred Hitchcock's **"Shadow of a Doubt"** — the Coens' film is both a loving re-creation and a witty re-jiggering of '40s noir. Like Hitch's movie, it's a portrait — not especially violent, but seething with angst and menace — of a quiet, unexceptional small-town life that suddenly turns mean and dangerous.

"The Man" of the title is a taciturn barber named Ed Crane, a chain-smoking middle-class loser trapped in a joyless existence, who narrates the story of his own downfall in a flat, toneless voice so empty of emotion it can chill you with nameless dread.

Ed is a role that Billy Bob Thornton beautifully underplays. He suggests what Humphrey Bogart might have done with milquetoast roles. In fact, with Thornton's dark complexion, sad eyes, fedora and constant cigarette, he often looks and sounds like a suburbanite Bogey, robbed of his energy and his irony.

Ed is one of those people so freakily detached from life that everyone else usually ignores him — which never seems to bother him. People talk at him, through him or right by him as he cuts hair expertly at the barbershop of his endlessly talkative brother-in-law, Frank Raffo (Michael Badalucco) — and then goes home to his faithless and contemptuous wife, Doris (Frances McDormand). He even sits placidly at regular dinners where the Cranes' main guest is Big Dave

Yet **"The Man Who Wasn't There"** is also a deliberate departure, as modern a take on noir as Godard's **"Breathless"** and Truffaut's **"Shoot the Piano Player"** were in the early '60s. The photography, shot on Technicolor stock with modern equipment, has more richness and softness. It's closer to **"Breathless"** than to **"Double Indemnity."** And though the film is obviously a pastiche of Cain's kind of story, the Coens have an enlarged perspective. Cain was a favorite writer of the French existentialist novelist Albert Camus. In a way, Camus' most famous novel, **"The Stranger,"** is his version of a James M. Cain story. And **"The Man Who Wasn't There"** is obviously the work of writers who know Camus as well as Cain, and who also know the reasons why film noir today is considered art and not trash.

Like all the Coens' movies, **"Man"** is supremely self-aware and darkly, hellishly funny. **It's also brilliantly written and acted to a fare-thee-well by an outrageously good cast. Everyone in the cast — including newcomer Adam Alexi-Malle as a prima donna piano teacher, and all the smaller role-players — seems unimprovable.** (Gandolfini is at his absolute non-**"Sopranos"** best.)

But, perhaps thanks to Thornton and McDormand, who bring startling levels of repressed feeling to their seemingly taciturn roles, this is also a sad film. It has an almost cosmic melancholy. The Coens' most typical themes are stupidity, self-delusion and mischance, and they can regard them either affectionately, as they did in **"O Brother, Where Art Thou?"** or ferociously and comically as they do in **"Blood Simple"** and **"Fargo."** **"The Man Who Wasn't There"** is a bit of both. Like its anti-hero Ed, it's soft-spoken and full of fear; it keeps us uneasily awaiting the postman's last ring.



bowfinger
by Paul Noble

BOWFINGER
Now Playing

Starring: Steve Martin, Eddie Murphy, Heather Graham

Written By: Steve Martin

Directed By: Frank Oz

Released By: Universal Studios

Rated PG-13 for sex-related material and language

Bowfinger reminds me of *The Producers*, one of Mel Brooks' best movies, but it's a slim reminder since *Bowfinger* not only takes the idea of *The Producers* and updates it, but improves on it as well.

The idea is simple, Bobby Bowfinger (Martin) is an out-of-luck movie producer/director with dubious credits from years ago (in his memorabilia he had not yet gone gray). He is handed the perfect action movie script with not only a great title: *Chubby Rain*, but also a great catch phrase: "I'm gonna get you suckas!" However, in order for his discovery to be a "go" picture, he needs **Kit Ramsey** (Eddie Murphy) to agree to the project. One major problem: Bowfingers approach to Kit is received with an emphatic NO, and a toss from Ramsey's limousine. What's Bobby going to do? Well, certainly not tell his crew that he's failed. **He lies and tells his troupe that Ramsey doesn't like to know he's on camera;** therefore the lines must be delivered without his knowledge and filmed in secrecy. Thus, a movie is made without the actor's knowledge with a budget that could barely be a down payment for a car.

The actors do well, **Eddie Murphy** perhaps the best. His at once neurotic and egotistical **Kit Ramsey** contrasts so well with **Jiff** (a Kit Ramsey look-a-like) that his roles capture the spotlight of most of the

comedy. Steve Martin effectively plays the straight man, where his opportunities for humor are found mostly in portraying a bumbling idiot of a filmmaker who attempts to look important. The way Martin yells "Cut!" in the film was so simple and subtly funny, it may go over most viewers' heads. **Heather Graham** is boring as usual but also stunningly gorgeous. Luckily, her role only calls for her to look cute most of the time and the situations deliver her humor. **Finally, Adam Alexi-Malle surprised me as the hilariously inept screenwriter of *Chubby Rain*, providing a great balance to the Bowfinger troupe.**

Fortunately, *Bowfinger* has less one-liners than it does great comedic situations, something that is severely lacking in comedies today. Steve Martin's stand-up was always more about doing something funny than delivering a great punchline, and that's reflected in his writing. Who better to direct *Bowfinger* than Frank Oz, a director with a great sense for funny situations, as witnessed by his previous work (*What about Bob?*, *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*). This is a movie that after a few days of thinking about it, the situations and characters seem more and more funny. I already want to see it again.

BONEAU / BRYAN-BROWN

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The Sun Bulletin Friday, February 20, 1998

Arts & leisure

A social evening to give you 'Goose-Pimples'

Waste no time. You have only until March 1 to see The New Group's production of Mike Leigh's "Goose-Pimples" at Off-Broadway's INTAR Theatre. Mr. Leigh, best known for his 1997 film "Secrets and Lies," has written the funniest and most harrowingly brutal evening of social intercourse since Edward Albee's "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf," and TNG has given it a richly textured and layered production.

Kevin Price's set design tells us immediately where we are and who lives here. It is a working-class suburb of London, the bachelor flat of a GQ-wannabe automobile salesman named Vernon (Sam Rockwell). As he dashes on stage his lacquered hair is the perfect match for the black-lacquered "music center." His flippant attitude is the embodiment of the album he chooses to play, Rod Stewart's "Do Ya' Think I'm Sexy?" The black-leather bar with blue neon, the black-and-tan zebra-stripe wallpaper, and the black leather sofa, combine to create a chilling background for Kevin and his flat-mate, Jackie (Caroline Seymour), and the guests who will complete an evening of friendships and dreams gone dangerously wrong.

Eric Becker's costumes also go a long way toward defining the people who inhabit this grasping, groping group. Kevin in shiny black open-front shirts and pants

On the Aisle

by Larry Ledford

that hug his butt, Jackie in stiletto heels, black mini-skirt and bare-shoulder gold lame. Jackie goes off to her job as a croupier as Kevin prepares a dinner party for a fellow car salesman, Irving (Max Baker) and his wife Frankie (Gillian Foss), (with whom Kevin is having an affair). The guests arrive with a cheap bottle of wine as a host gift, and little more to offer than Frankie's nasty little digs about the flat and Irv's merciless sexual innuendo to every line of dialogue.

As can happen in such evenings, however, and must in the theatre, things begin to go wrong. The steaks that Kevin had expected to serve turn out to be rancid, so he takes his friends to a restaurant to eat. Jackie returns from work in the company of Muhammad (Adam Alexi-Malle) an Arab businessman whose English extends no further than "taxi" and "hotel," whom she believes to be a Sheik who will help her make her fortune. He thinks she has brought him to a brothel.

Kevin and guests return and the evening takes an immediately threatening turn. Misunderstandings lead to incriminations, drinks lead to more drinks, which lead to unleashed biases, physical violence, and even more devastating

emotional and psychological injuries. Not for the faint of heart, and witheringly sobering when we find ourselves laughing at some of the same things that these unlikable characters find funny, "Goose-Pimples" takes mutual exploitation to new lows and theatrical possibilities to new highs.

Director Scott Elliott keeps the play and his audience in a framework of real-time immediacy and has guided his actors to a perfect balance of vulnerability and the threat. There is not a wasted gesture or laugh, there are moments of shock, of hold-your-breath expectation, and of hilarity. Mr. Rockwell and Mr. Baker make us cringe at their chauvinism. Ms. Seymour and Mr. Foss are the essence of what are basically two sides of the same character: one single and full to empty hopes, the other older and married and soured on the realization that the hopes won't happen.

Best of all is Mr. Alexi-Malle, an actor's actor, a lesson in understated stage technique. His fluttering fingers and darting eyes express his confusion, his desires, his hurt, and his impatience even as the rest of his ample body is at rest in the folds of that black leather sofa that dominates everything.

Goose-Pimples is at INTAR Theatre, 420 West 42nd St., NYC through March 1 only. Tickets are \$30-\$25. (212) 279-1200.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 2, 1998

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Entering From the Wings: Drama's Daring Upstarts

By PETER MARKS

What kind of vitamins are they feeding the prolific gang at that tiny entertainment powerhouse, the Drama Dept.?

A little more than two years ago, the group, a loose confederation of playwrights, performers and stage directors, existed only as some vague plans and a few press releases. Now, it's one of the city's hottest troupes. Not only have its four eclectic offerings been critical and popular hits, but next week an astonishing proportion — three of them — will be playing simultaneously: "As Bees in Honey Drown" at the Lucille Lortel Theater; "June Moon" at the Variety Arts, and "Uncle Tom's Cabin," its most recent production, which resumes at the Greenwich House on Monday for a weeklong extension.

Who do these guys think they are, Lincoln Center? That "Bees" and "June" are engaged for open-ended runs at two of Manhattan's most desirable small commercial playhouses is an amazing feat for a fledgling Off Broadway company that lacks such basics as a theater of its own. But more than that, the

Drama Dept.'s success is a testament to a new vitality among a band of lean, scrappy, creatively pumped-up theater companies in New York City that are eagerly staging the kind of serious, innovative plays, immaculately paced comedies, provocative dramas and sparkling revivals that perforce constitute the heart of the menu in a real theater town.

The Drama Dept. is in the vanguard of a phalanx of newly prominent groups that seem to be eclipsing older companies like the Manhattan Theater Club and Playwrights Horizons as the dominant force in the presentation of new work. And in the process, these companies are reshaping the Off Broadway theater. The roster of upstarts includes standout companies like the New Group, the Vineyard Theater and the Atlantic Theater Company, which are presenting what amount to the best new plays in New York in the past year: the New Group with Mike Leigh's perversely hilarious "Goose-Pimples"; the Vineyard with Paula Vogel's smart, gemlike "How I Learned to Drive" and the Atlantic Theater with Jez Butterworth's riveting, daz-

Continued on Page 4

In a scene from "Goose-Pimples," below, are Gillian Foss, left, Adam Alexi-Malle and Caroline Seymour.



Photographs by Sara Krulwich/The New York Times ("Mojo" and "Goose-Pimples") and Toby Wales

Entering From the Wings, Drama's Off Broadway Upstarts

Continued From Weekend Page 1

zling "Mojo." Add to these the success of "Gross Indecency," the runaway hit at the Minetta Lane about, of all things, Oscar Wilde's libel case (a show, by the way, that began in the commercially remote domain of Off Off Broadway), and the Off Broadway lineup is one of the most trenchant and satisfying in years.

What this also adds up to is an embarrassment of riches for lovers of serious theater, who have always found a haven Off Broadway. In recent years, however, Off Broadway's commercial houses — the theaters that lease their spaces for open-ended runs, as opposed to the protected, limited runs of the nonprofit theater companies — seemed to be moving away from drama in favor of gimmicky revues and novelty acts. It's instructive to see how a few good plays can turn the tide. Consider that not too long ago, three of the better known Off Broadway houses, the Minetta Lane, the Variety Arts and the Union Square, were home to cold and desultory enterprises like "Tokyo Shock Boys," "Zombie Prom" and "Tap Dogs." Today, all three are filled with plays: "Gross Indecency," "June Moon" and the less intellectually ambitious, though emotionally rewarding, "Visiting Mr. Green."

And the prospects for the next generation of smart shows are promising. Waiting in the wings are several other small Off Broadway companies like the Adobe Theater Company, Arden Party, Naked Angels, Target Margin, Theater Couture and SoHo Rep, and incubating theaters like Dixon Place, Performance Space 122, the Ohio Theater and the Flea, all of which seem capable of breakout successes. (Adobe and Theater Couture had especially strong autumns with two funny plays, "Duet! A Romantic Fable" and "Tell-Tale," which recently closed at the Cherry Lane Theater after transferring from P.S. 122.)

So Off Broadway, at the moment, feels a little like Balducci's just before Thanksgiving: the shelves are fully stocked with delectables. The plays are good and so are the players. From Sandra Bernhard, performing to sold-out crowds in her gloriously snarling new one-woman

show "I'm Still Here... Damn It!" at the Westbeth Theater Center, to Eli Wallach in a wise and unadorned star turn in "Visiting Mr. Green," first-rate performers are whetting playgoers' appetites for meaty diversions. Uptown, "The Lion King" may be roaring like thunder. But no matter how big the noise on Broadway, it cannot drown out the lively

Innovative, scrappy troupes are serving a banquet to lovers of serious theater.

buzz these days in the crowded lobbies of downtown playhouses.

What follows is a short tour past the ticket-takers and into the 200- and 300-seat Off Broadway auditoriums, where some of the season's best productions are nestled. While some may run for years, others may last for only weeks. It's all in the frenetic flame-on, flame-off nature of Off Broadway.

First of all, commit the following names to memory: Caroline Seymour and Clark Gregg. The actors are twin peaks of theatrical inspiration in two thrillingly staged black comedies, "GOOSE-PIMPLES" at the Judith Anderson Theater on West 42d Street in Clinton and "MOJO" at the Atlantic Theater in Chelsea. Ms. Seymour is the sublimely clueless boarder of "Goose-Pimples," a malice-filled riff on Thatcherite London, directed by Mr. Leigh's master American interpreter, Scott Elliott. And Mr. Gregg is Baby, the mesmerizing man-child of "Mojo," a play directed skillfully by Neil Pege that actually delivers the edge-of-your-seat suspense it promises.

It may be a little unfair to single out two adroit performances in a pair of ensemble pieces with such flawless casts. These productions remind you, once again, of the seemingly inexhaustible supply of young acting talent in this city, and of the delight in coming across a vibrant new face, whether it's Adam Alexi-

Malle as the crude and, ultimately, pitiable Saudi visitor in "Goose-Pimples" or those of Chris Bauer, Patrick Fitzgerald and Matthew Ross as the hapless, sycophantic hangers-on in "Mojo."

Still, the portrayals by Ms. Seymour and Mr. Gregg resonate even more deeply with the plays' themes. "Goose-Pimples" takes place in 1981 in a suburban Londoner's bachelor pad on an evening when Ms. Seymour brings home Mr. Alexi-Malle for what she thinks is a bit of networking and he interprets as a carnal opportunity. The violence here is mostly subtextual; Mr. Leigh sees it lurking in the grasping capitalism and latent xenophobia of Britain's long-repressed working class. Ms. Seymour's account of an ambitious casino worker without culturally sensitive antennae is rendered so credibly — and affectingly — that you can't help but absorb the playwright's and the director's lesson in the art of miscommunication.

Mr. Gregg, similarly, captures the insouciant menace of Mr. Butterworth's conjuring of a world of small-time operators and henchmen who speak a Mamet-like patois in late 1950's London. The actor, one of

the founding members of the Atlantic, coils like a cobra in the role of Baby, the wired, unpredictable son of a murdered nightclub owner. There's a sleek sensuality about Mr. Gregg that comes to the fore in stunning moments, as when he breaks, suddenly, into a little two-step across the stage. He embodies the creepy sense of peril that hangs over the play all the way through to its shattering denouement.

Both plays are British by birth, but there are worthy home-grown productions in small theaters as well. The most entertaining of these is not a play per se, but an example of a bravura performance nonetheless: Ms. Bernhard's hilarious cry for attention in "I'M STILL HERE... DAMN IT," which resumes its run at the Westbeth in the West Village on Jan. 19.

Whether spewing invective in mirthful tones or belting out golden pop oldies like "Midnight Train to Georgia," Ms. Bernhard is one of a kind. Solo shows have become a wilted cliché in me-me-me-crazed New York, but this actress-philosopher shakes the form back to life. So pointed is her commentary, she could be elected chairwoman of an American

Intemperance Society by acclamation. The show is a must for anyone bored by the same old thing.

The trio of long-running hits — "HOW I LEARNED TO DRIVE" at the Century Theater Center on East 15th Street; "AS BEES IN HONEY DROWN" at the Lortel on Christopher Street and "GROSS INDECENCY" at the Minetta Lane — have proved that straight plays can still hold rewards for producers as well as for Off Broadway audiences. But a couple of other strong, well-written American plays are closing too soon. "DEFYING GRAVITY," Jane Anderson's lyrical think piece on space and human potential at the American Place Theater on West 46th Street, and Richard Greenberg's generational drama "THREE DAYS OF RAIN," at the Manhattan Theater Club on West 55th Street, are giving their final performances on Sunday. They are affecting productions that feature exemplary acting, particularly by Lois Smith and Jonathan Hadary in "Gravity" and John Slattery in "Rain."

There are splendid portrayals, too, in a pair of more recent Off Broadway arrivals. The 82-year-old Mr. Wallach, for instance, is reason

enough to set out to the Union Square Theater for "Visiting Mr. Green. Jeff Baron's overly predictable story of Jewish men, one young, one of who view the world in entirely different ways and come to see eye-to-eye

At the other extreme of experience, two young actors, Jason Patrick Bowcutt and Michael Solomon, acutely dissect the psyches of those notorious thrill killers of the 1920's Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb in John Logan's psychological character study "NEVER THE SINNER" at the American Jewish Theater in Chelsea. The play, which is to transfer to the John Houseman Theater for a commercial run, receives brisk, imaginative staging by an up-and-coming director, Etha McSweeney. (It is also lighted with endless ingenuity by Howell Binley.) But it's especially noteworthy for the eerie yin and yang of Mr. Bowcutt's twerpy Leopold and Mr. Solomon's driven Loeb.

If psychiatrists at the time found that the two teen-agers, who murdered a 14-year-old boy simply to see what it was like, somehow completed one another's personalities, Mr. Bowcutt and Mr. Solomon pull off the intriguing, if somewhat stomach-churning, trick of seeming to inhabit a single, tormented soul. The play itself, constricted by a reliance on court documents, does not always make the imaginative leaps one might hope for in a work that concentrates so heavily on the characters' inner lives. Still, the actors are adept at filling even silent moments with meaning. You do come to understand what made them tick.

With the Off Broadway season still unfolding, there is more to be heard from the groups bringing so much good work to audiences. The Vineyard Theater is presenting a new play by Nicky Silver, "The Maiden's Prayer"; the Atlantic is importing a production of "The Beauty Queen of Leenane" by the Anglo-Irish playwright Martin McDonagh, and the New Group is presenting a dark new play about teen-age girls, "Hazelwood Junior High," on the stage of a city junior high school.

And who knows? The Drama Dept probably has five or six things ready to roll.

From 'Bees' to 'Mr. Green': Where to Seek a Change in Scenery

Here are the current Off Broadway shows mentioned in the Critic's Notebook article.

"AS BEES IN HONEY DROWN," Lucille Lortel, 121 Christopher Street, West Village, (212) 239-6200. Tuesdays through Fridays at 8 P.M.; Saturdays at 6 and 9 P.M.; Sundays at 3 and 7 P.M. Tickets: \$40 and \$47.50.

"DEFYING GRAVITY," American Place, 111 West 46th Street, (212) 239-6200. Through Sunday. Tonight at 8; tomorrow at 2 and 8 P.M.; Sunday at 3 P.M. Tickets: \$45.

"GOOSE-PIMPLES," Judith Anderson Theater, 422 West 42d Street, Clinton, (212) 279-4200. Tuesdays through Saturdays at 8 P.M.; Sundays at 3 and 7:30 P.M. Through Jan. 18. Tickets: \$25 to \$30. Show resumes on Jan. 23 at the Intar Theater, 420 West 42d Street, Clinton, (212) 279-4200. Tuesdays through Fridays at 8 P.M.; Saturdays at 3 and 8 P.M.; Sundays at 3 P.M. Tickets: \$25 to \$30.

"GROSS INDECENCY: THE THREE TRIALS OF OSCAR WILDE," Minetta Lane Theater, 18 Minetta Lane, off Ave. C of the Americas, Greenwich Village, (212) 420-8000.

Tuesdays through Fridays at 8 P.M.; Saturdays at 2 and 8 P.M. and Sundays at 3 and 7 P.M. Tickets: \$29.50 to \$47.50; \$20 for students.

"HOW I LEARNED TO DRIVE," Century Theater, 111 East 15th Street, (212) 239-6200. Tuesdays through Fridays at 8 P.M.; Saturdays at 3 and 8 P.M.; Sundays at 3 and 7 P.M. Tickets: \$45 to \$47.50.

"I'M STILL HERE... DAMN IT," Westbeth Theater Company, 151 Bank Street, West Village, (212) 307-7171. Reopens Jan. 19. Tuesdays through Saturdays at 9 P.M. Tickets: \$35 to \$50.

"JUNE MOON," Variety Arts Theater, 110 Third Avenue, at 13th Street, East Village, (212) 239-6200. Now in previews; opens Jan. 15. Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays at 8 P.M.; Wednesdays and Saturdays at 2 and 8 P.M.; Sundays at 3 P.M. Tickets: \$20 to \$45.

"MOJO," Atlantic Theater Company, 336 West 20th Street, Chelsea, (212) 239-6200. Through Jan. 17. Tuesdays through Fridays at 8 P.M.; Saturdays at 2 and 8 P.M. and Sundays at 7. Tickets: \$37.50.

"NEVER THE SINNER," American Jewish

Theater, 307 West 26th Street, Chelsea, (212) 633-9797. Through Sunday. Tonight at 8; tomorrow at 2:30 and 8 P.M.; Sunday at 3 P.M. Tickets: \$45. Show resumes Jan. 24 at the John Houseman Theater, 450 West 42d Street, Clinton, (212) 239-6200. Mondays, Thursdays and Fridays at 8 P.M.; Wednesdays and Saturdays at 2:30 and 8 P.M.; Sundays at 3 and 7 P.M. Tickets: \$45.

"THREE DAYS OF RAIN," City Center, 131 West 55th Street, (212) 581-1212. Through Sunday. Tonight at 8; tomorrow at 2:30 and 8 P.M.; Sunday at 3 P.M. Tickets: \$47.50.

"UNCLE TOM'S CABIN OR LIFE AMONG THE LOWLY," Greenwich House, 27 Barrow Street, Greenwich Village, (212) 354-2220. Wednesdays through Fridays at 8 P.M.; Saturdays at 3 P.M.; Sundays at 3 and 7 P.M. Through Jan. 11. No performances today through Jan. 5; performances resume Jan. 6. Tickets: \$30.

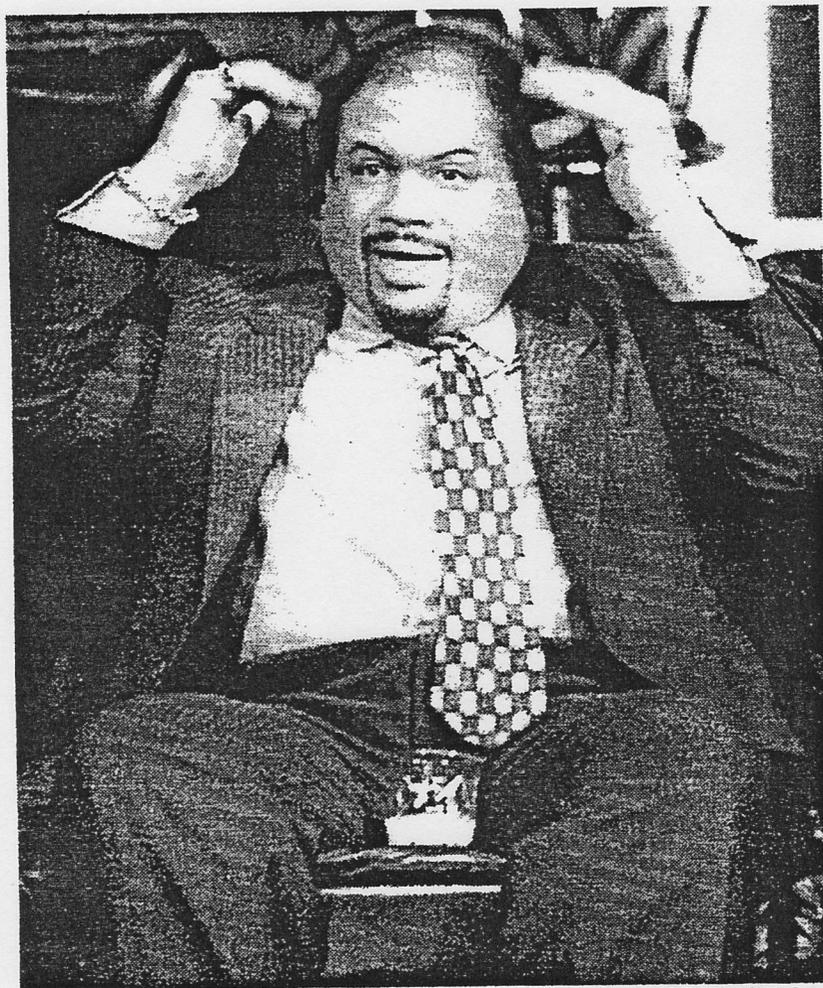
"VISITING MR. GREEN," Union Square Theater, 100 East 17th Street, (212) 505-0700. Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays at 8 P.M.; Wednesdays and Saturdays at 2:30 and 8 P.M.; Sundays at 3. Tickets: \$35 to \$45.

Weekend

THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, JANUARY 9, 1998

ON STAGE AND OFF

Rick Lyman



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Adam Alexi-Malle plays a bewildered Saudi in "Goose-Pimples."

English? Why Not?

During the question-and-answer sessions that sometimes follow performances of Mike Leigh's "Goose-Pimples," Adam Alexi-Malle tries to stay silent as long as he can, to keep people wondering about whether he can really speak English. "I have people actually saying, 'Oh, so you do speak English,'" he said.

Mr. Alexi-Malle's character in the scathing comedy is Muhammad, a Saudi who speaks only a few words of English and finds himself surrounded by a vicious assortment of vulgar, grasping Londoners.

Mr. Alexi-Malle, who speaks a half-dozen languages (including what he calls conversational Arabic), is on a leave of absence from the musical "Titanic" to appear in the New Group's production of Mr. Leigh's comedy.

He got the role, he said, by pretending to be a messenger and carrying his own résumé and photos up to the New Group's offices. "I love film, and I love Mike Leigh's work, so I just hand-walked my stuff up there," he said. A short while later, he was called in for an audition.

"Goose-Pimples" will give its last performance at the Judith Anderson Theater on Jan. 18, but will reopen on Jan. 23 at the Intar Theater.

Review: 'Bowfinger' over-the-top farcical treat

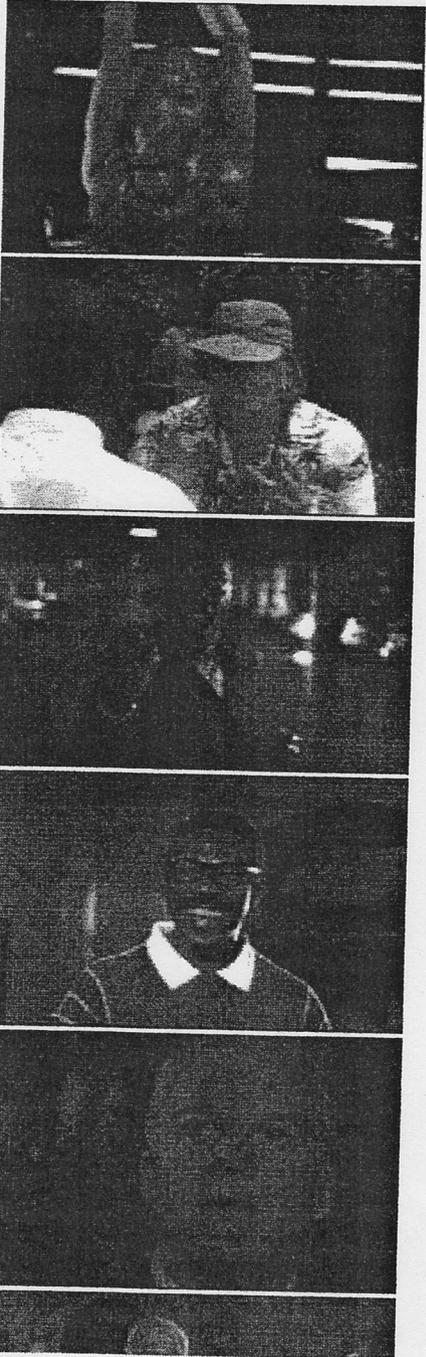
Web posted on:
Thursday, August 12, 1999 5:50:40 PM EST

By Reviewer Paul Clinton

(CNN) -- In Hollywood, if something happens more than once in a 20-minute period, it's generally labeled a "trend." With that in mind, the latest "trend" -- based on the recent releases of "Dick," "Mystery Men" and now "Bowfinger" -- seems to be broad, farcical comedies based on a one-note premise.

Or could it just be summertime?

Two of Steve Martin's best films were "Roxanne" (1987) and "L.A. Story" (1991) -- he wrote and starred in both of them. He's again put pen to paper and created the screenplay for "Bowfinger," in which he plays the title role.



VIDEO

Theatrical preview for "Bowfinger"

Windows Media 28K 80K

Paul's Pix: "Bowfinger"

Real 28K 80K

Windows Media 28K 80K

It's a story about a man who's a two-bit but still lovable con artist -- a poster child for losers everywhere. Bobby Bowfinger, who hovers on the edge of Tinseltown's outer limits, is a self-anointed film producer who's peddling a ludicrous script. He's followed by an entourage of would-be actors and

filmmakers -- a band of misfits.

Heather Graham -- of "Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me" -- leads the pack as Daisy, an opportunistic young woman from the Midwest with stars in her eyes and ants in her pants. As in the past, Graham displays an intense sexuality bathed in wide-eyed innocence.

Christine Baranski nails her character of Carol, a delusional former stage actress clinging to her moments of glory from the past. Newcomer Kohl Sudduth plays the dim-witted Slater, who feels his talent is just waiting to be discovered.



(UNIVERSAL PICTURES)

Jamie Kennedy ("Scream," 1996, and "Scream 2," 1997) plays Dave, a guy who works as a go-fer at a major studio and "borrows" cameras, lighting kits and other filmmaking equipment while acting as Bowfinger's cameraman. Adam Alexi-Malle does a nice turn as Afrim, an Iranian accountant-screenwriter who has, along with everyone else, hitched his wagon to Bowfinger's questionable star.

Mild Murphy

Which brings us to the film's co-star, Eddie Murphy. In "Bowfinger," Murphy is reunited with producer Brian Grazer, who was behind another film in which Murphy also played dual roles, "The Nutty Professor" (1996). Here, he again pulls double duty.

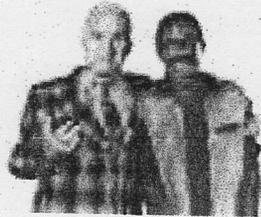
For some filmgoers, a little Murphy goes a long way, but this film is tailored to his manic talents. And his screen time is cut in half since he's the second banana here. Murphy appears as brothers Jiff and Kit Ramsey. Jiff is an intellectually challenged nerd with braces and thick glasses. Kit is a high-profile, egoistic, paranoid, action star.

After a clever scene in which Bowfinger pitches his movie idea about an alien invasion of earth to a studio boss played by Robert Downey Jr., our would-be filmmaker gets a green light. But only if he delivers Hollywood's man of the moment, Kit Ramsey. The star, of course, isn't interested. So our con-man hero comes up with a scheme to ambush Kit at outdoor cafés, and parking garages -- any public place -- with a film crew and his ragtag band of players all shouting meaningless dialogue at the confused and frightened star.

The plan is to secretly make Kit Ramsey the inadvertent star of Bowfinger's shoestring-budget independent film called "Chubby Rain," by piecing together all the ambush footage with other scenes shot on the side. Then Bowfinger stumbles upon Kit's lookalike brother Jiff. He's more than happy to stand in for his famous brother's close-ups, and -- presto -- instant movie magic.

Movie Eye

BOWFINGER



THE CON
IS ON

OPENS
AUGUST 13

Get the Poster!

Released: August 13, 1999

Rated PG-13 for sexual situations and profanity.

97 Minutes

Directed by Frank Oz

Produced by Brian Grazer

Universal Pictures

Cast: Steve Martin, Eddie Murphy, Heather Graham, Terence Stamp, Christine Baranski, Adam Alexi-Malle, and Jamie Kennedy.



Although Steve Martin's *Bowfinger* is essentially a one-joke movie, it is very funny. Wait a minute, maybe I should call *Bowfinger* a film and not a movie.

Slapstick and wit have always marked Martin's stuff. Some of the most hilarious scenes in *Roxanne*, his best movie, come from C. D.'s physical humor, when he defeats bullies with a tennis racket, for instance; but he also defeats a bully in a bar with barbs! Steve Martin is, after all, an accomplished playwright. Wasn't that a Chicago style manual we glimpsed on C.D.'s shelf, as he waited for Chris to come over?

Bowfinger gives us more of the same heady and ridiculous stuff. One minute Bowfinger is tying his dog's hind feet together, the next he's talking his way out of a big-time ticket by enlisting the cop and his car in the movie being shot. This Bowfinger guy is charming because he's a con-man with a vision, a smart-ass who's sincere and dedicated to the art form he's been preparing for all his life.



Bowfinger is an extremely small-time producer and director. In the opening scene we see snapshots

and posters decorating Bowfinger's deteriorating house: community theater productions and publicity stills. What excites the man now is a script written in two weeks by his accountant. It's a story about aliens that fall to Earth in precipitation, and it's called 'Chubby Rain'. There's little chance it will actually be made, except that Bowfinger cajoles a bunch of buddies - amateur actors, an accountant and a shady parking attendant - into devoting some time to the project. When a producer (Robert Downey Jr.) says that he will buy 'Rain' if it stars Kit Ramsey, Bowfinger has his mission. But how will he ever convince this action-movie superstar to star in 'Chubby'?



Ramsey is played by Eddie Murphy, and it's a superb performance. Murphy plasters the character with paranoia, exaggerated fits of neuroses blended with the egotism of a Hollywood icon. What fits into his condition perfectly is Bowfinger's outlandish idea: his actors approach Kit Ramsey anywhere he happens to be, and spout their lines at him. Of course this subterfuge ignites Ramsey's mental imbalance with hilarious results. Terrified of aliens and conspiracies, Ramsey flees to his rich, gray-suited guru (Terence Stamp), who runs a cult called 'MindHead'. The members of this organization, by the way, wear pyramidal hats and act overly calm. What Martin jabs at here is MindHead's apparent control over Ramsey's life; the suave big cheese offers Kit any services he might need to "keep it together," to resist the alien obsession and the urge to show "Mr. Weinie" to the Laker girls. We wonder how much of Ramsey's astronomical income goes to the white-haired pseudo-psychologist.

By now Murphy's used to playing multiple roles, and in *Bowfinger* he also portrays Kit's brother Jiff, a look-alike whose personality differs drastically. His Jiff is a grinning milquetoast who sports glasses and braces on his teeth - a truly conventional but thoroughly funny nerd. Why the need for a double for Kit? Well, the celebrity has gone to MindHead's secret retreat for cases like his heavy-duty meltdown. Because Jiff is so gullible, Bowfinger and his crew have him dash across an L.A. freeway, and he makes it, twice! In a piece full of various takes on the motion-picture industry, it's Murphy who garners the best lines and scenes in *Bowfinger*.



Steve Martin is the mind behind it all, and for most of the movie the joke works. In one scene we watch Ramsey's big Mercedes chased by an old black Riviera, an "alien" (Jiff in a tin-foil costume!) as both cars speed in reverse until a police cruiser puts a stop to it. But there are too many scenes that rely on the premise of Ramsey's shocked and frantic reactions to these filmmaker-stalkers. As an actor, Martin is outshone only by Murphy. We sense Martin's long experience, timing, and subtle brilliance in every scene he's in.



A subplot that does not work fully involves Heather Graham as Daisy, a blonde from Ohio who gets off a bus in Hollywood and asks, "Where do I go to be a star"? Martin's idea of having this ingenue sleep with anyone who might kickstart her career is funny, but Graham seems to lack the calculation needed for more laughs; her sluttishness is too nonchalant.

Christine Baranski as Carol, a stupendous over-actor, carries her role over-the-top. The audience guffawed every time Carol jumped out and spewed her nonsense at Kit Ramsey. I should also mention Adam Alexi-Malle as the accountant-turned-screenwriter Afrim. This man is pudgy and droll and expert at what he does. You will, I guarantee, lose it when Afrim does his bit as the cop! Finally, Bowfinger's dog Betsy is a big help in one scene in particular, when the director needs the sound of high heels (which are attached to the pooch's front paws!) in a scene in which Kit is being followed through a parking garage.

A Season For Quirky Heroes

QUICKSCAN

- ▼ The Man Who Wasn't There
- ▼ K-Pax
- ▼ Life as a House
- ▼ The Harry Potter Phenomenon
- ▼ Crossing Jordan
- ▼ The Magic Never Ends (PBS)

▲ The Man Who Wasn't There

THE MAN WHO WASN'T THERE (A-4, R): Taste for the movies of brothers Joel and Ethan Coen (*The Big Lebowski*, *Fargo*) may not be universal, but they deserve respect for a consistent vision and compassion for quirky mid-America characters seldom found elsewhere. *The Man* is Ed Crane (Billy Bob Thornton), a Santa Rosa barber in 1949.

Ed is meek and doesn't talk much, but he talks endlessly to the audience in flat voiceovers that reveal a Byzantine inner life. Although Ed doesn't talk much to wife Doris (Frances McDormand), he "just knows" she's having an affair with her married boss, Big Dave (James Gandolfini). When a sleazy customer invites Ed to invest in a dubious enterprise, he goes for the money. Blackmail and murder follow.

The ironies are thick and deadpan in the understated, smoky, black-and-white, deeply shadowed style of *film noir*.

While resembling earlier Coen films (especially *Blood Simple*), *Man* offers a hero who is more tragic than darkly comic. Basically, characters in Coen melodramas tend to be slightly dumber than the audience. These characters get entangled in a thicket of unexpected turns and incredible luck, good and bad.

Thanks to Thornton's quiet credibility, we tend to think this is not silliness but life. Ed's faults include an obsession with a young woman pianist who charms him endlessly with her playing of "Moonlight Sonata." Ed, who knows zilch about music, tries to arrange classical lessons for her. This leads to more sadness.

The film's richness is in the depth and humanity of its flawed characters, including Tony Shalhoub as a clever but never-quite-right defense lawyer and Adam Alexi-Malle in a splendid cameo as a piano artiste who delightfully explains the nature of talent. *Finely crafted morally and artistically; likely to win some Oscars; recommended for mature viewers.*

▲ K-Pax

K-PAX (A-2, PG-13) is a mysterious-stranger movie—the sort in which an outsider whose origins are unknown comes into a bad situation and makes it better, then has to go back to wherever it was he came from. It's the Christ story, the redemption story and a plotline in countless westerns.

Here the self-described alien (Kevin Spacey, calling himself Prot—rhymes with remote) shows up in contemporary Manhattan. He claims to be an interstellar traveler from the planet K-Pax in a distant galaxy where, despite having two suns, the light is much dimmer. He's here out of curiosity, since earth (he says primly) is in the early stages of evolution and may not make it.

Discovered in Grand Central Station, unshaven and wearing sunglasses, Prot is hustled off to the psychiatric institute, where he's interviewed by the skeptical Dr. Powell (Jeff Bridges). Armed mostly with the usual Spacey wit and arrogance, a few weird mannerisms and