



Courtesy of 20th Century Fox

## Feminine mystique

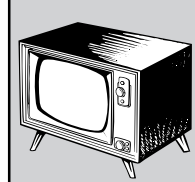
Robin Williams enjoys vacuuming as Mrs. Doubtfire in the 1993 movie of the same name. For more on Williams and gender roles, see story at right.

# Birdcage just not funny

By CHRIS CONTI  
OLD GOLD AND BLACK REVIEWER

How many drag queens are too many? I'm not sure that anyone knows the answer for sure, but it is obvious that the American film industry has definitely surpassed its limit. Many modern films attempt — unsuccessfully — to breathe new life

## Video



into well-tread convention, and *The Birdcage* is no exception. Unfortunately, it finds itself following the same path of such films as *To Wong Foo, Mrs. Doubtfire* and *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. Instead of concerning himself with a credible plot and witty dialogue, the writer of the screenplay felt that he could attract enough laughs by exploiting stereotypes of gays. Unfortunately, the laughs in this movie were few and far between.

The film opens with a mediocre drag show in *The Birdcage*, the South Beach club owned by the gay couple of Armand and Albert Goldman, played by Robin Williams (*Dead Poet's Society*) and Nathan Lane (*A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*), respectively. Armand's

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son Val pays a surprise visit to tell them good news and bad news — he's fallen in love and is going to be married, but his fiancée is the daughter of Senator Keeley, played by Gene Hackman.

The co-founder of the Coalition for Moral Order, a group of intolerant conservatives, the senator is opposed to the wedding until it seems to be the only possible way to improve his public image after a scandal involving his organization breaks loose. Chaos ensues as the Goldmans are

forced to find a way to appear as a normal and traditional family.

It is at this point that the film loses what little charm it had. Each situation is unnecessarily drawn out and more than painfully obvious. The dialogue itself has no humor; it is mostly dry wit that's much too dependent on delivery, which can only carry it so far. This talented cast honestly tries its best, at least when it comes to putting itself in the spotlight. But there seems to be little honest interaction between the characters, only competition that serves to stagnate the few scenes with humor potential.

The whole plot is at best predictable. As director of the film, Mike Nichols was blessed with a superior cast of major and peripheral actors, including Christine Baranski (*Cybil*) and Hank Azaria (*Friends*, *Herman's Head*). But Nichols choose not to take advantage of this capable talent and instead created a grand piece of mediocrity whose only accomplishment is to beat a dead horse. If you want to see witty men in dresses, try *To Wong Foo, Thanks For Everything Julie Newmar*.

## Sleepers

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with the likes of Brad Pitt, Kevin Bacon, Robert DeNiro, and Dustin Hoffman. On paper, *Sleepers* seems like a sure thing, but on celluloid, it's a different story. A few of them actually.

*Sleepers* begins in the Hell's Kitchen section of New York in the summer of 1966. Mikey, Tommy, John, and Lorenzo are four young Catholic boys who spend their days playing stickball, hanging out with their cool priest Father Bobby (played by DeNiro) and generally avoiding their volatile home situations. The boys are played by four exceptional young actors, the only familiar face being Brad Renfro (*The Client*).

This portion of the film plays like a lovingly crafted document of a simpler era. The boys' neighborhood escapades unfold with a constant stream of feel-good oodles playing on the soundtrack.

It's hard not to like this part of the movie. Director Levinson is still in control of the film at this point, and he is certainly in his element, having scored critical successes in the past with other nostalgic pieces, such as *Diner*, *Good Morning Vietnam*, and *Avalon*.

But moments later, the film turns on a dime and heads in a shocking direction. The boys pull a prank with tragic results on a hot dog vendor. They steal his cart, which rolls away from them and critically injures a bystander.

This gets them sent to the Wilkinson School for Boys, where they are to spend at least a year. Soon after arriving, they meet Sean Nokes (Bacon), a cruel guard who takes an immediate dislike to the "Hell's Kitchen Boys." Nokes and three other guards regularly abuse, rape and terrorize the boys throughout their stay at Wilkinson.

Thankfully, none of this is depicted in graphic fashion, but what is shown is still enough to turn a strong stomach. The boys endure all of their torture, but they are all changed by the ordeal. This section of the film is also very strong, although obviously more disturbing. If anything, I think the film coasts through here on the goodwill the audience has already built up for the four boys.

The film cuts then to 1981. Two extremely shady-looking men, who are soon revealed to be Tommy and John all grown up, run across Nokes in a restaurant. They confront and graphically murder him for the hell he had inflicted on them at Wilkinson.

For my money, this is the last good scene in the film. Not entirely coincidentally, we immediately after this are plunged headlong into the film's actual plot — and only 90 minutes in, too!

Here the movie collapses under the weight of the story it has left to tell. While Tommy and John have grown into hoods, Lorenzo (played by Jason Patric, who also narrates) has become a newspaper reporter and Mikey (Pitt) is a lawyer working for the New York District Attorney's Office.

These two cook up a scheme to get their two pals acquitted of Nokes' murder, get revenge on the other guards, and put the past to rest. Mikey is somehow allowed to prosecute the case, which he plans to bungle.

He also arranges for his friends to have a non-threatening dupe of a defense lawyer who will faithfully read the courtroom script that Mikey has written for him. This dupe comes in the form of alcoholic washout Danny Snyder, played by Dustin Hoffman.

I was shocked at this character's lack of depth. He exists mostly as comic relief, which Hoffman pulls off just fine. Still, it's strange to put Hoffman in a film and then ask so little of him.

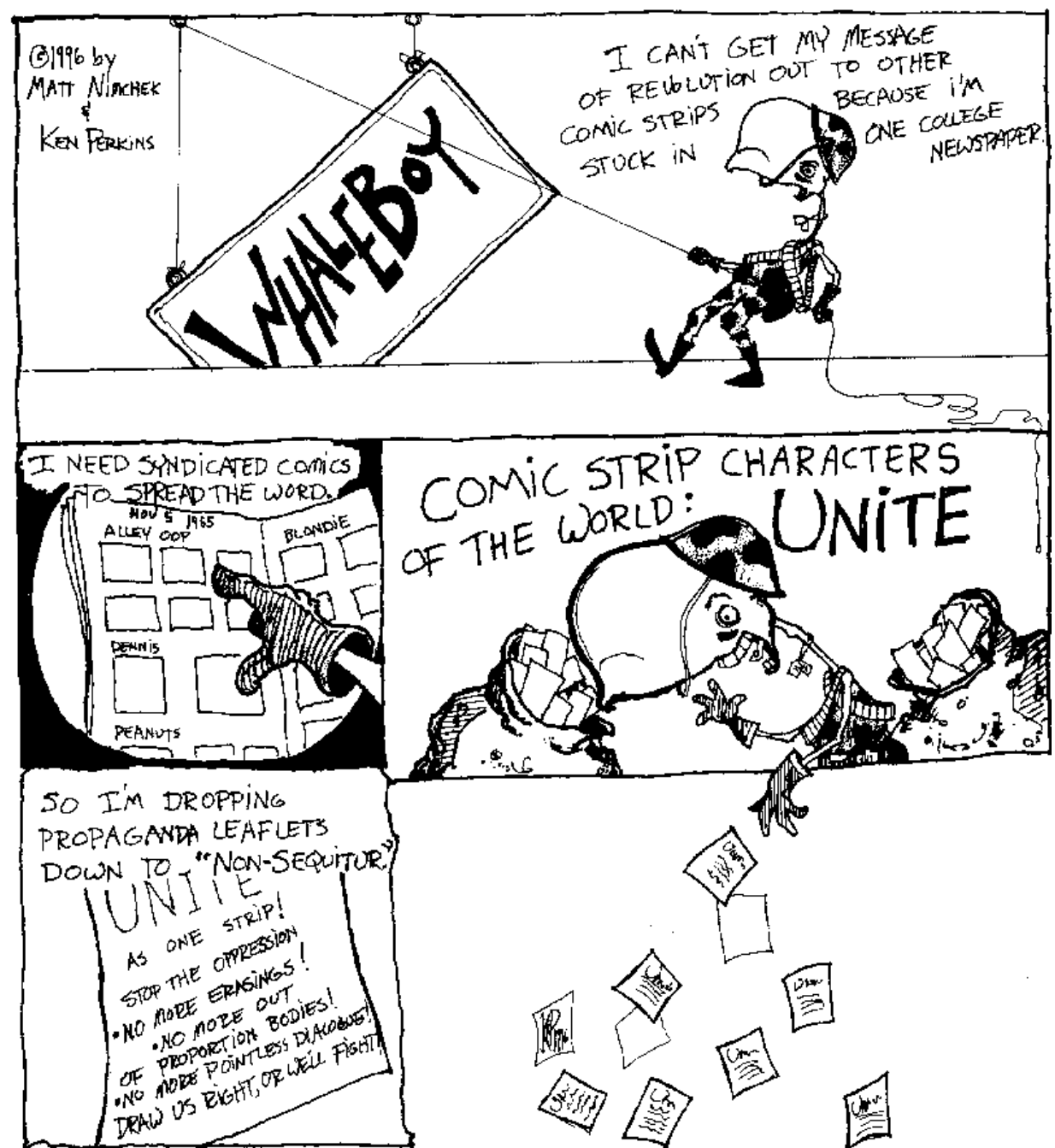
Meanwhile, Lorenzo has been given the task of finding an alibi for Tommy and John for the night of the murder. He eventually asks Father Bobby to take the stand and claim to have been with them that night, because who would question a priest's word? Will Father Bobby swear on the Bible and then lie in court? Come on, would the Catholic Church be so upset about this movie if he didn't?

Also, during this time, Mikey and Lorenzo are setting up the other guards. And Lorenzo spends time with Carol (played by Minnie Driver), the lone female member of their childhood pack. Her character feels especially shoe-horned in to balance the overwhelming maleness of the story.

Does this all seem like a lot to put into an hour of screen time? It is. The childhood and adulthood halves of *Sleepers* do not mesh well at all, and as a result the second half feels like the start of a brand new movie. The affection we had for the boys is gone when they are replaced with dissimilar men.

When Levinson flashes back to childhood moments towards the end of the film, I think it requires effort to remember that these kids supposedly grew into the adults seen in the last hour. It's all very disorienting. Had the first half been abbreviated and the second lengthened, *Sleepers* would probably feel much more coherent.

As it stands, it's a disappointing jumble of a movie that simply tries to tell too much story in too little time.



## Non Sequitur by Wiley



## CALENDAR

To have your event listed, send mail to P.O. Box 7569, e-mail arts@ogb.wfu.edu or fax us at 759-4561.

## ON CAMPUS

### Exhibits

**Treasures from the Museum of Anthropology.** The exhibit features works of art from Africa, Asia, the Pacific and the Americas.

**When:** Through March 1  
**Where:** Museum of Anthropology  
**Cost and info:** Free. Ext. 5282.

### Movies

**Phenomenon.** 1996. John Travolta stars as a man that gains extraordinary powers of the mind after lightning strikes him.

**When:** 7 p.m., 10 p.m. Fri. and Sat; 7 p.m. Sun.  
**Where:** Pugh Auditorium.  
**Cost:** \$2.

**Bob Roberts.** Tim Robbins stars in this political satire about a fictional folk singer turned Senatorial candidate.

**When:** 8 p.m. Fri.  
**Where:** Tribble A3.  
**Cost:** Free.

**1776.** Movie version based on the Broadway musical of the same name. Story revolves around the Declaration of Independence and the events leading up to its creation.

**When:** 8 p.m. Sat.  
**Where:** Tribble A3.  
**Cost:** Free.

### Music

**Halloween Concert.** The department of music will present a Halloween concert including Bach's "Tocatta and Fugue in D minor."

**When:** Midnight today

**Where:** Wait Chapel  
**Cost and Info:** Free. 759-5100

### Theatre

**Holy Ghosts.** Directed by Sharon Andrews, *Holy Ghosts* is a recent play written by Columbia University professor Romulus Linney.

**When:** 8 p.m. Nov. 8, 9, 13-17  
**Where:** Mainstage Theatre, Scales.  
**Cost and info:** \$5 for students. Ext. 5788.

### Workshops

**Cherokee Storyteller.** Freeman Owle, a Cherokee storyteller and carver, will give a demonstration of his talents.

Participants will also have the opportunity to make their own carvings.  
**When:** 1-5 p.m. Sat.  
**Where:** Museum of Anthropology  
**Cost and Info:** \$1 for students. 759-5282

## ELSEWHERE

### Clubs

**This Week's Spotlight: Reggae Extravaganza.** Reggae invades Cat's Cradle with performances by Jah Daniel, Truth and Rights, and others.

**When:** Sat.  
**Where:** Cat's Cradle, 300 E. Main St., Carrboro.  
**Info:** (919) 967-9053.

**Cat's Cradle.** Fri.: Everything with Hipbone. \$5. Sat.: Reggae Extravaganza. \$8. Tues.: The Chills with Spent. \$7. Wed.: Chavez. \$4.  
**Where:** 300 E. Main St., Carrboro.  
**Info:** (919) 967-9053.

Lizard and Snake Cafe. Today:

**Jennyanykind.** Fri.: The Mayflies USA. Sun: Chokebore with Hippopotamus.

**Where:** 110 N. Columbia St., Chapel Hill.  
**Info:** (919) 929-2828.

**Ziggy's Today.** Shag. Fri.: Primitive Radio Gods with Patti Rohberg. Sat.: Eddie From Ohio.

**Where:** 433 Baity Street.  
**Info:** 748-1064.

### Exhibits

**A Thousand Years of Czech Culture.** The collection of over 200 historic artifacts and works of art capture the history, politics, religion, and folk customs of the Czech Republic.

**When:** Through March 16  
**Where:** The Gallery at Old Salem  
**Info:** 721-7300

**Pictured in My Mind.** Works from the Gitter/Yelen collection will be on display along with Winston-Salem artist Sue Moore's work.

**When:** Through Jan. 5  
**Where:** Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, 750 Marguerite Drive  
**Info:** 725-1904

**Confessions of a Cultural Tourist.** SECCA will present William Dunlap's work. Dunlap's art reflects his personal history and the stories of the South, his native land.

**When:** Through Jan. 12  
**Where:** Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, 750 Marguerite Drive  
**Info:** 725-1904

**Food, Food, and More Food.** Artworks Gallery is presenting an exhibit of food-related oil paintings by Chris Flory and several other artists.

**When:** Through Nov. 16  
**Where:** Artworks Gallery, 564 N. Trade St.

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