

most challenging films, it is also, in every respect, one of the best. Highly recommended.

Distant Thunder

color. 114 min. Paramount Home Video. 1988. \$89.95. Rated: R

John Lithgow stars as a Vietnam "bush vet" who comes down out of the Olympic Mountains in Washington State after one of his friends commits suicide by "kissing" a moving train. Taking a job as a dock worker, he is cajoled by a secretary (Kerrie Keane) into contacting his teenage son (Ralph Macchio), whom he hasn't seen or spoken with in 15 years. What could have been an absorbing father and son drama is, instead, a total mess. First, we are asked to believe that there are a significant number of Vietnam veterans who not only live in the hills, but regularly commit suicide by train kissing. Then we are expected to swallow Keane's humanitarian impulses (she can apparently pick a Vietnam vet out of a crowd from 50 yards away). Toward the end, in a long drawn-out reunion that has father and son united against a "bush vet" who's gone crazy, we watch an insulting portrait of a veteran who acts like Ronald McDonald, but makes semiprofound remarks when the plot warrants it. Finally, we must sit dumbfounded as the crazy vet kills one person, seriously wounds another, and is given the responsibility of driving to the hospital and waiting in the truck (all, apparently, being forgiven because ain't war hell?). This is nearly a two-hour movie, but dialogue only occupies perhaps a third of it—the remainder is given over to long tracking shots of green forest and even longer reaction shots to every scrap of poor dialogue delivered. Although meant to be a real heart-thumper, the pain this film delivers is felt much lower down the back. Not recommended.

The Experts

color. 94 min. Paramount Home Video. 1988. \$89.95. Rated: PG-13

A John Travolta film that slipped through the cracks? Yes, indeed, which is where it should have stayed. How's this for an intelligent premise: The Russians have built a fake American town in order to train operatives, but something isn't quite right. So they go to America to drug and kidnap a pair of experts: John Travolta and Arye Gross, two New Yorkers who are led to believe that they are being hired to run a nightclub somewhere in Nebraska. Why do the Soviets need American expertise? Because their make-believe town is straight out of the 1950s,

and they've never heard of VCRs or Walkmans. Only an idiot or an impressionable teenager would swallow this setup. The global village concept is fairly well established, and since many Soviet citizens own VCRs and Walkmans, it's a bit of a stretch to believe that modern technology hasn't trickled up to the government. Of course, most of the humor is spent on either demeaning or patronizing the Russian populace (if there is a hell, I suspect it includes being patronized by John Travolta). And, of course, the filmmakers blow their own shaky premise sky high, when Soviet agent Kelly Preston gets on the dance floor and demonstrates moves that could only be acquired by repeated viewings of *Dirty Dancing*. Not to put too fine a point on it, if stupidity were a legal offense, the filmmakers would be looking at life imprisonment.

Heathers

color. 102 min. New World Video. 1988. \$89.95. Rated: R

"What's your damage?" "upchuck factor," "megabit"? *Heathers* brings viewers up-to-date on the latest in teenage slang, while also providing one of the most refreshing and unique movie experiences of the year. The "Heathers" are a powerful elite clique at Westenburg High, composed of three girls who share the first name of Heather, and a fourth named Veronica (Winona Ryder). Veronica is fed up with the almighty Heathers, but doesn't know what to do about it, until she meets J.D. (Christian Slater), a relatively psychotic rebel. J.D.'s idea is simplicity itself: kill 'em and make it look like a suicide. So begins a bold and truly adventurous black comedy, which scores double bonus points for hitting any number of satirical targets, and still manages to get across an anti-elitist message. The language is raw, the humor is shocking (in one memorable sequence Ryder intentionally burns herself with a cigarette lighter, and Slater, leaning over quickly with what appears to be concern, lights his cigarette from the smoldering hole in her palm), and the satire is vicious. It's a wonder that director Michael Lehmann got the film made, typical that it died a quick death at the box office, and glorious that it stands to be resurrected on video into an instant cult classic. Highly recommended.

Mississippi Burning

color. 127 min. Orion Home Video. 1988. \$89.95. Rated: R

Based on true events, Alan Parker's

Oscar®-nominated drama points its loaded gun at Mississippi and fires. Therein lies the film's shortcoming. When three Civil Rights workers (two white, one black) disappear in 1964, a pair of FBI agents (Gene Hackman and Willem Dafoe) are sent to investigate. As a Mississippi native, Hackman understands the racism and hatred the duo run up against. But Dafoe, who uses "bureau procedures," can't seem to get anywhere with either white or black residents. Justice finally prevails, but it rings rather hollow. Which is not to say that Parker's film is bad. On the contrary, it is a gripping drama, with images that virtually sear into your brain, and performances that are strong all around (especially Hackman's). But when it's over, you can't help but feel that you've witnessed a morality play; the black people are all sensitive victims, the white people are all idiot, redneck racists. Only Hackman and Frances McDormand (wife of an idiot, redneck racist) have any shades of gray. *Mississippi Burning* is a powerful film that almost disguises its limitations. It deals with a subject that needs more attention in the movies, even if it does so by playing it safe. Recommended.

Travelling North

color. 97 min. Virgin Vision. 1988. \$89.95. Rated: PG-13

This is the kind of small film that you keep rooting for, even after it becomes apparent that the movie is not going to be as good as you hoped. Leo McKern (*Rumpole of the Bailey*, those Smith Barney TV ads) plays an obstreperous retiree named Frank, who grabs his divorcee girlfriend (Julia Blake) and heads north for a lakeside paradise he has discovered. Based on the play by Australian playwright David Williamson, the film suffers from two major drawbacks: 1) the audience is tipped off to Frank's eventual heart attack within the opening minutes, and 2) the film is nearly half over before Frank's conflict with Julia, his doctor, his neighbors, and just about anyone else begins. By then, most of the audience will be lost—happy home movies about vacations having a fairly limited audience outside the immediate family. Conflict and dialogue are what give a film life, and they are both woefully absent during the first half of the film. The second half picks up considerably, and eventually rewards viewers with a bittersweet, comic-tragic autumn romance. The question remains: How many people will stick around? Recommended, with the above reservations.

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