

## 'Pretty Baby' more sensitive than sexy

By Kent Wolgamott

Those who attend Louis Malle's *Pretty Baby* to be titillated with its much discussed "child pornography" will be disappointed, for producer-director Malle uses little explicit sex in taking his viewers into the haunting world of a New

Orleans bordello of the early 1900's. While Violet is entering the world of prostitution, her mother, Hattie, strongly played by Susan Sarandon, is doing everything she can to escape from it and when given the chance to escape by marriage, she leaves, abandoning her daughter.

Violet in the end is rescued from the bordello by marriage to the mysterious figure of E.J. Bellocq, a photographer whose remarkable pictures of the Storyville prostitutes still hang in the Museum of Art in New Orleans.

Bellocq (Keith Carradine) haunts the bordello, capturing the girls on film, fascinated by the characters and atmosphere in Storyville.

Malle also gets strong performances from Frances Faye, as the worldly wise madam, Nell, and from Antonio Fargas, the brilliant young black character actor, who plays the "professor", the brothel's jazz pianist.

With the help of his cinematographer, Sven Nykvist, Malle explores the humanity and problems of the people who inhabit the house, and through the strong performances of the three main characters explores the moral ambigu-

ties of the life in the bordello and of today's society.

Shields portrays Violet with a troubling mixture of knowledge and innocence, a girl who can deliver the prostitute's sales pitch with enthusiasm while only later be an inquisitive typically American 12-year-old.

It is through her view of the world of the brothel as normal and acceptable, and her eagerness to take her place in it, that much of the film's questioning of innocence and corruption is done.

Sarandon, as Hattie, portrays a character divided between her lifetime home, the bordello, and a desire to escape, her responsibilities as a mother and her wish to begin her life again.

Perhaps the character who embodies the greatest contradictions is Bellocq, who attempts to be the young girl's lover, guardian and detached artist at the same time.

Carradine gives a strong performance as a man who can watch a 12-year-old's virginity being sold with an amazed detachment and then rescue that same child from the world of prostitution with passion.

The film ends in a final contradiction when Hattie returns to take Violet from Bellocq and as they await the train for St. Louis, Hattie's husband snaps their picture with a small Brownie, replacing Bellocq's glass plate camera.

While using less nudity and rough language than most other movies of the same rating, Malle has created a tender sensitive film about human emotions, morals, and sexuality, raising questions about each which are troubling and difficult to answer, but questions which deserve exploration.

Malle has once again handled a very delicate subject well and produced a poignant, if troubling film.

### review

The controversy about *Pretty Baby* has been stirred by the film's story, based loosely on fact, of a 12-year-old girl growing up in a brothel in New Orleans' Storyville district.

Violet, played by child model Brooke Shields, is the daughter of a prostitute, who at the age of 12 has her virginity sold at auction as she follows her mother into the world's oldest profession.



Brooke Shields plays a pre-teen hooker in "Pretty Baby".

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