

Insipid 'Pick-Up Artist' is worth turning down

By Geoff McMurtry
Staff Reporter

"The Pick-Up Artist," (Douglas III, 5:15, 7:15, and 9:15 p.m.)

Molly Ringwald was one film away from major superstardom. Robert Downey was one or two big roles away from nationwide name recognition. Dennis Hopper was a respected cult figure. Writer/director James Toback, cinematographer Gordon Willis and most of the crew were well-known and respected in the film industry for the work they've done.

Movie Review

If "The Pick-Up Artist" doesn't close soon around the country, that's all over with. Aside from a lame premise, lackadaisical direction, and a limp, aimless

plot, this film had a lot going for it. Excellent acting, and...uh, well, Dennis Hopper.

Robert Downey is Jack Jericho, a guy who spends every waking moment thinking up slobbering and superficial pick-up lines to try out on each and every reasonably good-looking female he encounters during the course of his average day. In his spare time, he's a grade school gym teacher.

A success rate of one for 30 or so doesn't seem to faze him in the least, so he scores about every day or two. One of these simple conquests is Randy (Molly Ringwald), who holds out for several seconds before giving

in. However, (amazing surprise plot twist) she won't give him her phone number for his list, so he still pursues her after the fact. It also turns out her drunk father, the famous ex-gambler (Dennis Hopper), owes the Mafia loads and loads of money (yet another amazing plot twist, and darn near

original, too). She's working double shifts in her job as a museum tour guide so she can donate the extra money to her local off-track betting service in a vain, honorable and myopic effort to save Dad's miserable existence.

Along the way we get to see what a great guy Jericho really is, caring for his ancient grandmother, and warning her to beware of sleazy guys on the make. That is, we get to see what a great guy he is when he's not out telling some girl she looks like an old painting and has an "awesome name."

We also get to go to Atlantic City, N.J., and find out what a truly great gambler Randy is, and, darn the plot twists, Jack, too. Unfortunately for the audience, this provides the conflict that kept the film from ending after 30 minutes.

Jack and Randy try to overcome their attraction for each other, but they can't, and both are afraid they are just

too darn dangerous for each other. "We're both have too much gambler in us," one says. "Maybe you could gamble on me," says the other. "Let's trade lines and stretch this scene," says one or both or someone just offscreen. Yup, a tour guide and a gym teacher — radical gambling lions.

If any of this sounds interesting at all so far, I apologize.

"The Pick-Up Artist" bungles a rather difficult premise, which already has been done anyway. Most of the central plot seems lifted from an MTM Productions film of a few years ago called "A Little Sex," which was infinitely superior to this. The suspenseful climax is lifted from Altman's "California Split," and while not as technically interesting as that film, "The Pick-Up Artist" does manage to come off as being just as meaningless.

"The Pick-Up Artist" is a fine example of Hollywood formula filmmaking at its worst.

The "message" of this film seems to be that all men are untrustworthy, irresponsible, worthless phlegm. Downey's character is a vacuous sleazebag, Hopper's is a helplessly drunk, and most of the others are unthinking, ruthless thugs. On the bus to Atlantic City, a woman eludes a leering drunk, then tells Randy about the varied abuses of her many husbands, boyfriends, etc. Randy asks why she puts up with it, and she replies that men are fun to be around. Randy ponders this, then agrees, but insists they have no value beyond that.

While it would sound like a nice twist to aim misogyny back at males, and it may be true that men are irresponsible, worthless phlegm, this celluloid slagheap is far too insipid for even the most adamant feminist to bother with.

Any point Toback may have been trying to make got lost long before anyone else in the film realized what it was.

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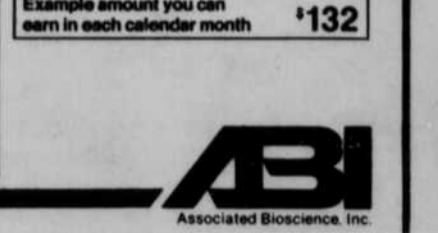
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by Berke Breathed