

'The Principal' art of elevating garbage into cinematic craft

By Charles Lieurance
Senior Reporter

"The Principal," State Theater, 14th and O streets
Sometimes it's hard to tell exactly what it is a movie director does. Films have become so slick and seamless that the director's work is nearly invisible.

In the past the auteur was not so

Movie Review

a terrifying place, a maze of corruption and lawlessness, where scrawled anarchy symbols on the walls take on a new, menacing significance. Belushi emotes and jokes his way through the terrors around every corner perfectly. There are occasional thuds throughout the film, though, where the true banality of the situations shows through the slick, kinetic veneer. Here and there Gossett or Belushi get a tad too sentimental and land on a laughably maudlin line or two. Here and there one of the jungle kids gets a little too cute and winds up playing Jai to Belushi's white savage.

The last lines of the film thud like a plumb bob hitting the bottom of an oil barrel:

"Who do you think you are, man?"

"He's the principal, man!" shouts Jai proudly.

"Yeah, I'm the principal, man," says Tarzan.

But considering the enormity of trash potential in this film, these lines and scenes are forgivable, because all in all "The Principal" is perfectly likable and involving. It rides along with breakneck momentum and sheer charisma, never stopping to let the audience think about how ludicrous each situation is. Had a lull ever appeared in this film, it would have fallen apart completely.

This is the director's craft and sullen art, to elevate garbage to the level of art, to suspend disbelief, to create



Troy Winbush, James Belushi and J.J. Cohen in "The Principal." Courtesy of Tri-Star Pictures

inconspicuous. The great directors — Eisenstein, Truffaut, Godard, Hitchcock — lent a certain jaggedness and eccentricity to their films that, although it hampered commerciality on occasion, left a definite director's signature on the celluloid.

In modern corporate America, the mark of a truly ingenious director may be his or her ability to salvage complete trash.

"The Principal," directed by Christopher Cain, is a perfect example. Sporting a script full of obvious holes, nearly absurdist situations and an inane "new Tarzan" mentality, "The Principal" would look like unfilmable crap to most reasonable directors. But not to Cain, who manages to quell natural disbelief with an explosive soundtrack, gritty cinematography and totally engaging performances by James Belushi, Louis Gossett Jr. and Michael Wright.

Belushi plays a sort of anti-hero Tarzan festering in a good white suburban school. His dead-end job and frequent drunkenness have made him a man of somewhat "uneven" temperament. In the first few minutes of the film, Belushi explodes when he sees his wife in a bar with her divorce

lawyer. Belushi is one of the few people who could make a bat-wielding drunk sympathetic.

As punishment for his behavior, Belushi is sent to hell, a blackboard jungle littered with kids who eat sweatpops for breakfast. The teachers have reached a level of scared impotence. The police have better things to do in the neighborhood than keep track of the kids. And Michael Wright, as Victor, has formed a brutal, violent terror-mafia in the school.

As white principal of this black jungle, Belushi's first reaction is to jump ship fast. But it seems Gossett, the school security guard who knows "how things are 'round Brandell High," has been waiting for a last-chance white man with Belushi's feverish personality. And together they set about quenching the fires of this urban inferno.

For those hypercritical souls who see through sheen to vapidly with ease, "The Principal" can hardly be recommended. At its core is a fraud.

For those who glory in the illusion and escapism movies can provide, "The Principal" is an explosive, taut piece of general entertainment.

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