

'The Gift' wrapped in suspense

■ Keanu Reeves turns in strong work as a racist, while Cate Blanchett goes Southern as a mystic tarot card reader.

BY SETH FELTON

For those of you who like movies in which you always think something is going to jump out from the side of the screen and gnaw on the main character, I give you "The Gift."

It stars Keanu Reeves, who plays an abusive adulterer, and

Cate Blanchett, who plays a widowed psychic mother of three (I know it almost sounds like a soap-opera score).

Initially, Blanchett is threatened by Reeves, whose wife (Hilary Swank) had come to her for solace after being beaten. Blanchett advises her to leave him, and he's not too happy about that.

But the movie complicates when the fiancée of one of Blanchett's friends goes missing. Blanchett's psychic abilities lead the authorities to the body, but even after a trial is held, Blanchett remains uncertain of the real killer, and the movie morphs in the latter half into a whodunit mystery.

This movie has very few surprises. It's a formula movie that does exactly what you expect of it.

Being a mystery thriller, the film quickly gets the audience to empathize with the main character so that we can spend the rest of the movie getting all nervous and uptight about her well-being. Her house is out in the middle of the bayou, so it's nice and isolated, and of course Blanchett lacks the ability to turn on lights in her house or lock her doors.

As a good thriller should, "The Gift" plants just enough doubt about each supporting character so that we don't trust anyone. This effect is heightened by Blanchett's occasional visions, which are vague enough to implicate several characters in different events of violence and menace.

The formula of this type of movie also requires the main character to be a terminally poor judge of character and general situations of danger, and thus requires that she go searching for clues to solve the mystery in the middle of a misty swamp only when it's dark and raining and she's just had some vision of a guy whacking her with a flashlight.

What I'm trying to say, basically, is that this movie is utterly predictable, but that's OK. This movie knows its genre, and its limitations (and being written by Billy Bob Thornton, it damn well should). It doesn't try to do anything too fancy - it just sets up a good story, and then it tells it.

It also give the story a little tweak with the introduction of Blanchett's psychic powers, which towards the end take on a strange mysticism. Her visions also provide that ever important avenue for more things to jump out of dark corners, always a plus.

Reeves, as much as I hate to admit it, gives a good performance as a racist redneck, and Blanchett gives a strong performance as well. But Giovanni Ribisi, who plays Blanchett's troubled friend, steals the show. He gives a powerful and often frightening performance worthy of note.

So in the end, this movie will not make you think too much. It doesn't tackle any big issues or settle any burning questions. It's simply a good flick with good acting and enough of a plot to hook your interest and then keep it.

"The Gift" Starring Cate Blanchett, Keanu Reeves, Giovanni Ribisi and Hilary Swank. Directed by Sam Raimi. Written by Billy Bob Thornton. Rated R for violence and language. Playing at the Cinema Twin.



Jerry Morgan/DH

it's a **Ragtime** The musical that's swept the nation finds its way to Lied

BY BILLY SMUCK

The Tony Award-winning musical adaptation of E.L. Doctorow's cherished 1975 novel, "Ragtime" is at the Lied Center for Performing Arts this week.

Proclaimed as the Best Musical of the Year by USA Today, "Ragtime" is a depiction of three culturally diverse families whose lives intertwine during a time of great social change at the turn of the 20th century.

Each family, one an upper-middle class, white Anglo-Saxon Protestant, another a Harlem black, and the third a socialist immigrant Jewish family, has great hopes for the future. However, the ugliness of intolerance and discrimination overshadow their ambitions.

Mary Gutzi, who plays the radical anarchist Emma Goldman, said the issues "Ragtime" deals with are still around today.

"It's sort of a universality of these themes regardless of the time that has passed," Gutzi said.

Though conflict arises in "Ragtime," it isn't focused solely on bigotry or misfortune according to Gutzi.

"There is some violence, but it's not all dark," she said. "There are a lot of heartwarming and shocking moments."

The overall theme of "Ragtime," however, is essentially what Gutzi wanted to make clear, despite its various subplots.

"This is a show that portrays humanity, we're all the same (and) regardless of our color, our beliefs or disbeliefs, the essence is the same," Gutzi said.

Gutzi's character, Goldman, is one of many prominent figures such as Henry Ford, Booker T. Washington, Harry Houdini and J.P. Morgan that

"Ragtime" recognizes and incorporates into its fictional story that makes reference to pivotal historical events.

A fictional story it is, but one that is very similar and realistic to the way life was a century ago, which is exactly what novelist E.L. Doctorow wanted.

Doctorow said while writing the story in 1972, "It angered me that the great medium of fiction, as wild and all encompassing as the world, was thought to have only the smallest and most personal and private autobiographical subjects for its domain.

"If facts were what people wanted, fine, I would give them facts they never dreamt of."

"Ragtime" was made into a motion picture in 1981 which Gutzi said didn't do justice to "a novel that is so rich." While the musical was being produced, Doctorow's blessing was sought and fondly given.

Gutzi said when Doctorow approved the musical, which uses the same dialogue as the novel, Doctorow said "that's my story."

It's a powerful story at that, one that invokes an emotional response in the audience Gutzi said.

"It stirs a sense of compassion, a sense of identity," Gutzi said. "It inspires a real emotional response on many levels."

"Ragtime" premiered in Toronto, Canada, in 1996 and from there went onto Los Angeles where it spent a year. Gutzi said they got "an incredible response" in a city that caters mostly to motion pictures rather than theater.

From there, "Ragtime" spent 10 months in Chicago and is now touring nationally.

It was the acceptance in Los Angeles that let playwright Terrance McNally, director Frank Galati and the cast know they were part of something big.

"Martin Sheen came up to us and said, 'Do you people know what you've done here? This show has to go national!'"

Mary Gutzi
Ragtime actress

Gutzi said that movie stars like Robert DeNiro, Barbara Streisand and Martin Sheen were in awe of the show.

"Martin Sheen came up to us and said, 'Do you people know what you've done here? This show has to go national!'"

Gutzi said that people in Los Angeles were talking and the show just became more popular and gained momentum from there.

"Word of mouth got around town that if you miss this show, you've missed the best show in town," Gutzi said.

Skinnee Js album only on Web, but it's worth the surf

■ 'Volumizer' gives listeners a second installment of the groups' intelligent and diverse take on rap-rock.

BY ANDREW SHAW

Braggadocios and whimsical. Ethereal and hard-hitting. With "Volumizer," 2 Skinnee Js explore the various corners of their talents, resulting in one of the best albums of the last year.

But you can't yet find it on the shelves of your favorite local music store.

The recording of "Volumizer" ended in late Spring of 2000 and Capricorn, the label responsible for 311, CAKE, the Js, and many other modern acts, had the release slated for September of last year.

When Capricorn decided to throw in the towel, their hands were at the will of potential buyers, which has delayed the release of "Volumizer" until February, not to mention temporarily postponed their

tour and disappointed the group's fans.

In an act of love, bravery and trust in the technological machine, the Js have released "Volumizer" on Napster to get the music out to their faithful followers. And we couldn't be happier.

"Volumizer" will be the Js second major-label release. The underground popularity of "Supermercado!," the Js debut album, exposed their unique twist of funk, new wave and rap.

Although I'm tempted to call their sound "rap-rock," the music of 2 Skinnee Js is far more intelligent, diverse and interesting than what the term "rap-rock" has come to portray. Where Limp Bizkit feels compelled to repeat the same four-letter words, the Js have a vocabulary to battle the most inclusive thesaurus. Where Eminem finds success in his brutal

honesty and lyrics that graphically portray what he thinks are real-life situations, the Js spin metaphors and similes more intricate than e. e. cummings'.

Opening the album with "Horns of Destruction" leads listeners into a world where the artists know their talents, and Special J and J Guevara, the dueling MCs, beat their chests like the cockiest of ballers. But as "Volumizer" unfolds, you can't help but agree with them. Special and Guevara are a dynamic duo of verbal assault, bouncing rhymes off of each other like oral rubber.

The Js dip far into their new wave element on "Secret Frequency." The song sounds like a lost track from Fountains of Wayne's pack of bouncy alt-pop. The Spice is showcased throughout the tune with a happily sliding keyboard part, setting "Secret Frequency" as one of the Js giddiest tracks.

But the Skinnees are at their absolute best in "The World In Her Eyes." The track features the most intricate, scintillating

and shrewd set of rhymes from the Js toolbox, or anyone's at that. The list of allusions covers Shakespeare, Sinatra and science, in which the music accompanying the blindly intelligent vocals is mature and involved, backed with the right amount of pace and bounce to keep you rocking even after multiple listens.

The only disappointment from "Volumizer" comes when thinking about how the industry manipulates its artists' skills and intelligence in their quest for the next quick dollar. The 2 Skinnee Js are entertainers and scholars, never underestimating the mental capacity of themselves or their audience like most modern rap and rock acts do.

The Js push the boundaries of popularity without pushing the boundaries of decency, and it's in this constant display of light-hearted intellect where 2 Skinnee Js find success.

2 Skinnee Js "Volumizer" 2000 Capricorn