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found Alcott's novel "very strong-minded, full of character and a wonderful picture of New England family life". Sixty-two years on, Australian director Gillian Armstrong obviously feels much the same. The period is meticulously caught, from Schumann's *Kinderszenen* being amateurishly plonked on a parlour piano to a ball populated by characters of Dickensian ripeness. A visit to the opera recalls, rather more modestly, the opening scene of Martin Scorsese's *Age of Innocence*.

The script, slightly updated here and there, has some beautiful writing — and writing it is, because *Little Women* is a strongly autobiographical work, as Alcott was writing about her struggle to make a name for herself. Perhaps Susan Sarandon's mother is rendered a little too 'strong-minded', too often given to pat comments of the proto-feminist kind, but Winona Ryder brings just the reserve and intelligence that Jo needs. A gem of a film.

WILLIAM DART

THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION Director: Frank Darabont

Stephen King provides the unlikely source for this saga of a male bonding that blooms in one of Maine's toughest prisons, when a young banker (Tim Robbins, all quiet efficiency) meets up with the prison fixer (Morgan Freeman quite possibly doing an Oscar turn). Darabont offers us AN enjoyable, if longish (142 minutes), night at the movies, even if there's a feeling of *déjà vu* lingering about the edges. Prison films are a hardy genre, and the script offers little in the way of invigorating characterisations. From Clancy Brown's sadistic head guard to James Whitmore's tragically institutionalised librarian, we've seen them all before. Only Bob Gunton's warden, as corrupt as he is slimy and sanctimonious, manages to leap off the page (particularly with his sinister 50s crewcut later in the film).

The Darabont film to watch out for is his 1991 *Buried Alive*, which is still doing the Sky circuit. It's a neat little study of an affair gone wrong, with a punishment worthy of Edgar Allen Poe. Jennifer Jason Leigh is at her crispest and so is the film itself, running almost an hour shorter than *Shawshank*.

WILLIAM DART

STARGATE Director: Roland Emmerich

The city of Ngada on the planet of Abydos, millions of light years from earth, is a dull, dull place, drab as only a desert can be. It's certainly a severe let-down after the spectacular 30-second trip that takes us there. *Stargate* has granite-jawed Kurt Russell and crew travelling to the outer limits of space, with Russell determined to destroy anything that might be a threat to the Amerikan Empire.

This is *Boys Own* stuff — frenetic, noisy (David Arnold's score is particularly unsparing) and, with the exception of James Spader's cunning linguist (he masters an ancient tongue in a matter of minutes to sweet-talk the glamorous Sha'uri), a succession of comic book heroes and villains.

Harmless? Perhaps not. Am I alone in reading a murky sub-text into a film which pits the full force of the American right against Jaye Davidson's evil Ra, an effete queen surrounded by a court of languid and beautiful people? Backlash time again?

WILLIAM DART

SHALLOW GRAVE Director: Danny Boyle

This pacey little black comedy presents three characters (Christopher Eccleston, Ewan McGregor and Kerry Fox) who inadvertently get caught up in cadavers, stolen loot and murderous psychos. And perhaps they deserve it — from the opening scenes Boyle seems determined that we not feel much sympathy for them, as they ritually humiliate hopeful flatmates.

If you can cope with this tiresome trio — and I must admit I was totally alienated the first time around — Boyle has fashioned a snappy 92-minute diversion. He shows a talent for presenting thuggery with a new twist (a brutal head-smashing seen through a money dispensing machine) and engineers some nice visual touches (an attic with shafts of light emanating eerily from holes in the floor). The twists don't give up, right through to the final scene, played to the jolly strains of Andy Williams singing 'Happy Heart'.

There are a few worries, regardless of how you cope with the morality of the whole affair; one is the contrived writing of the scenes with

the two policemen, the other Simon Boswell's post-Minimalist score — come back Mike Oldfield all is forgiven.

WILLIAM DART

FILMS FOR KICKS

This is the second year the Queen City is being offered a selection of those weird and wonderful movies time almost forgot. April 6 sees the opening of the *Incredibly Strange Film Festival 95*.

For those of you who found *Serial Mom* a little sanitised, you can catch John Waters' classic *Female Trouble* along with Ed Wood's classic turkey, *Plan 9 from Outer Space* — timely this one, with Tim Burton's *Ed Wood* bio-pic opening later this year.

I have fond memories of being exposed to the rare genius of Doris Wishman at London's notorious Biograph cinema in the mid-70s. Her 1974 opus, *Deadly Weapons*, presented Chesty Morgan of the 73 inch bust as a Bandit Queen of her time, avenging the murder of her lover with what could only be described as mammary suffocation. Chesty's on display in the Festival in Wishman's *Double Agent 73* — no explanation necessary. But there's more to Wishman than cleavage — as one writer commented: 'Her style is all her own, only Jean-Luc Godard could match her indifference to composition and framing.'

Treating myself the other night to a Jack Hill double of *Spider Baby* (1967) and *Switchblade Sisters* (1975), I pondered whether there was a definable aesthetic here. The two films are immensely different. *Spider Baby* is beautifully shot in elegiac black and white, and struggles to overcome gratingly self-conscious acting and moments of deadly tedium (and you can't fast-forward in the cinema). *Switchblade Sisters*, on the other hand, is a snappy little B-grader, that grips one all the way from a cat-fight in a burger-bar to slaughter on the roller rink.

Oscar Wilde warned us that ignorance was like an exotic fruit that should not be touched. Like naive and folk art, this is a cinema that knows no rules and regulations. In its way it's a cinema of innocence — one only has to think of the laboured farces of Paul Bartel to realise masterpieces in this genre can't be fabricated by knowing cineastes. The other thing is it is participation cinema — it needs an audience. There's nothing sadder than watching such films alone in front of a TV screen. Group indoctrinations are imperative!

WILLIAM DART

REEL NEWS

Louis Malle is chasing Uma Thurman to play Marlene Dietrich in a film about her life ... *What's Eating Gilbert Grape's* Leonardo DiCaprio may play James Dean in an upcoming film about his life ... Sigourney Weaver stars in Roman Polanski's latest film *Death And The Maiden*. The film is based on Ariel Dorfman's play of the same name, and Dorfman co-wrote and co-produced the project ... Henry Rollins appears alongside Keanu Reeves and Dolph Lundgren in the Robert Longo directed *Johnny Mnemonic*. The film is based on the novel by godfather of cyberpunk William Gibson ... Richard Linklater's latest film is a love story called *Before Sunrise*. It is set in Vienna and stars Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy ... Arnold Schwarzenegger will star in his long planned film version of *Planet of the Apes*. A \$70 million budget has been set and Arnie is trying to talk Oliver Stone into producing the project. Philip Noyce will direct ... Tim Robbins will tackle his second directorial role with *Dead Men Walking*. It is based on a novel about a nun who comes to the aid of a man on death row ... Leonardo DiCaprio and Marky Mark(!) star in *The Basketball Diaries*, a film about 'violent addictions' by first time director Scott Kalvert ... Sam Phillips and Jeremy Irons join the terrorist squad for *Die Hard III* ... Stephen King movie number 26 is *Dolores Claiborne*. It co-stars Jennifer Jason-Leigh as a journalist who is forced to confront her troubled past when her mother is arrested for murder. Kathy Bates, who is turning into quite the King movie regular (*Misery*, *The Stand*), co-stars as the mother ... 12 year old *Interview With the Vampire* and *Little Women* co-star Kristen Dunst stars alongside Robin Williams in *Jumanji*. The film is about a boy who gets stuck in a jungle board game. He and a host of jungle creatures are released years later by two children who find the game ... schlock-horror king Sam Raimi's latest film is a spaghetti-western. *The Quick and the Dead* stars Leonardo DiCaprio, Sharon Stone, Russell Crowe, Lance Henriksen and Gene Hackman ... Twentieth Century Fox is planning a sequel to *Speed*. The working title is (wait for it) *Speedo*. It is "most likely" original stars Keanu Reeves and Sandra Bullock will return ... the third *Batman* movie, *Batman Forever*, is directed by Joel Schumacher, with original director Tim Burton having taken an "executive" back seat. Michael Keaton is succeeded by Val Kilmer as the caped crusader. *Scent of a Woman's* Chris O'Donnell will play Robin. Jim Carrey will play the Riddler (now that Robin Williams has turned the role down). Drew Barrymore and Nicole Kidman fill the fox quota ... the follow-up to *Candyman* is the prequel *Candyman, Farewell to the Flesh*. It tells the story of the Candyman's life before he lost his hand and was attacked by bees. A doomed love affair takes the blame.

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