

Film

erences that gave last year's *City Slickers II* its zing. The superb visual joke in the opening scene of *Forget Paris*, involving a starchy organist, and a fairly hysterical sequence in which Winger finds herself overly attached to a panicking pigeon, do not a totally satisfying comedy make.

WILLIAM DART

Mrs Parker and the Vicious Circle

Director: Alan Rudolph

Alan Rudolph's biopic of Dorothy Parker, the mistress of the barbed epigram, has one superb asset: Jennifer Jason Leigh. Her portrait of Parker is as dry as the driest martini, cynically drawing the best lines of the script, and managing to let just a sliver of vulnerability through. She recites her celebrated observations on suicide at a swank garden party, and — just to stress that she is indubitably the centre of the vicious circle — she recites extracts from Parker's writing at the camera from time to time.

The vicious circle is the problem. Even discounting the unredeeming sourness of the film



Clerks

Clerks

Director: Kevin Smith

Clerks is a hip little comedy, made for probably less than the cost of Batman's left glove. More than one reviewer has described it as *Slacker* behind a counter.

The film revolves around the harassed Dante, who is trapped behind the drugstore counter for the weekend and persistently traumatised by both friends and customers. His girlfriend confesses she's given 37 other guys blowjobs, and an anti-smoking campaigner virtually sets up a soapbox at the counter — all this in the first 10 minutes of business.

For a film that delights in the seemingly spontaneous — there are a number of bizarre scenes, like one customer coolly watching a cat shit, or another playing with eggs on the floor of the store — it's beautifully scripted. The rambling, freewheeling conversations between Dante and his friend Randal recall Tarantino, and the amateur cast are never less than energetic (my favourite moment is when Marilyn Ghiglotti, as Dante's girlfriend Veronica, screams at some loafers: "Go compute!")

Clerks, photographed admittedly in rather patchy black and white, cost a mere 27,000 dollars. One wonders what Smith might achieve if a kindly studio were to add an extra three zeros to the sum.

WILLIAM DART

32 Short Films About Glenn Gould

Director: François Girard

This is an extraordinary film that manages to convey the idiosyncratic genius that was Canadian pianist Glenn Gould. Girard's unusual format for his tribute is 32 vignettes echoing the 32 *Goldberg Variations* by Bach, the first work that Gould recorded in the mid-50s, and a score that he was very much associated with throughout his career.

The film conveys much of Gould's humour and obsession. There's the opening scene, with the pianist (played by Colm Feore) slowly walking towards us, across icy wastelands, with a Bach soundtrack slowly impinging on the consciousness; a close-up of piano strings and

hammers as they create another Bach work; a collection of interviews with the sort of misguided critics whom Gould himself loved to satirise in his own writings and radio works; or the collage of pills accompanied (yet again) by Bach and a matter-of-fact medical commentary.

The dramatic structure of the film allows for Feore to interview himself. As for telephone interviews and conversations, which were one of Gould's obsessions, there are more of these than poor Barbara Stanwyck had to cope with in *Sorry Wrong Number*. Friends contribute too — Yehudi Menuhin is generous (in French) about Gould's special genius, Margaret Pascu (in English) talks frankly about GG's pill-popping. We see the impact Gould's bristling interpretations had in an effective scene in which Gould charms a nervous German chambermaid with one of his Beethoven recordings.

32 Short Films is hardly the last word on Gould. His important decision to retire from the concert stage is shown by a backstage scene at his concert in which, after following a labyrinth of corridors to the stage, he signs a programme for the stage manager's wife. At one stage there is a snatch from Petula Clark's 'Downtown', but little indication that it would inspire the eccentric Gould to write thousands of words of ecstatic praise for both singer and song in *High Fidelity* magazine. But then, just as Gould himself returned to studio at the end of his career to re-record the *Goldbergs*, perhaps in a world where financing was not a problem, Girard may well be able to come up with a further 32 portraits.

WILLIAM DART

Country Life

Director: Michael Blakemore

With a premise rather loosely borrowed from Chekhov's play *Uncle Vanya*, we're on an Australia farm, circa 1919. A rural family cope with the arrival of the pompous Alexander, who has returned after a supposedly successful career as a theatre critic in London. All kinds of animosity is whipped up, most dramatically between Alexander and his brother-in-law Jack.

Don't look for any Chekhovian subtleties here. Blakemore himself plays the obnoxious critic with all the subtlety of Monty Woolley in *The Man Who Came to Dinner*. For a good half of the movie Greta Scacchi, as Blakemore's

young wife, does little but look startled. Making up the kiwi contingent are a moony Kerry Fox and a stolid Sam Neill, who even gives an environmentalist

lecture at the local town hall — a rather advanced concept for the time and period, I would imagine. Veteran actor Googie Withers, as the mutton dealing cook of the household, does a turn worthy of *Upstairs Downstairs* at its ripest.

All this not discounting the occasional crude touch in the script, such as when Neill and Scacchi catch sight of some kanga's rooting while they're alone in the bush and feeling vaguely extramarital.

Perhaps Michael Blakemore's distinguished theatrical background should not be held against him (his credits include work at the Glasgow Citizen's Theatre and the National Theatre), but his latest film seems to have all the packaging requirements of a *Montana Masterpiece Theatre* epic — I could swear there were discreet ad' fades every 10 minutes or so.

WILLIAM DART

Forget Paris

Director: Billy Crystal

There's a cool contrivance to Billy Crystal's latest comedy that barely conceals the fact this is a distinctly old-fashioned affair. With a soundtrack that has Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald alongside big band bashes worthy of Billy May or Henry Mancini in their heyday, you only have to close your eyes and it might be Cary Grant and Audrey Hepburn up there on the screen.

Well, almost. Alas, Billy Crystal and Debra Winger just don't have what it takes to make *Forget Paris* work as the romantic comedy it clearly has ambitions to be. One sits back and intellectually applauds the ingenious scripting, but, in the final count, it's the droll racontage of such accomplished comedians as Paul Masur and Julie Kavner that remains in the memory, not the tortuous marital problems of Crystal and Winger.

Forget Paris is an amiable enough comedy, but, as Crystal films go, there are stronger contenders — one misses the neat cinematic ref-



Glenn Gould

(and it's a particularly depressing 135 minutes), the rest of Parker's literary colleagues just don't light up, despite the gallons of bootleg gin they're constantly downing. These too are figures of legendary wit and charm, men like Robert Benchley, Charles MacArthur, Robert Sherwood and Donald Ogden Stewart. It says a lot that the sprightly Lili Taylor makes more of an impression in a few walk-ons as Edna Ferber.

Some of the problem lies with Rudolph's frustratingly complex soundtrack, which almost out-Altman's Altman in its overlapping dialogue. One hopes that Rudolph's next film will capitalise on the very real achievements of his 1992 *Equinox*.

WILLIAM DART

The Glass Shield

Director: Charles Burnett

This is a brave, and perhaps even reckless film, tackling a genre and subject which these days seem more the natural domain of the television pilot. Charles Burnett tells us the tale of JJ Johnson, a young black rookie stuck in a precinct in one of the rougher districts of LA, and becoming entangled in the corruption that is day to day fare amongst his fellow cops.

The Glass Shield asserts its integrity by dint of its sharp-edged script (written by the director from Johnson's own story) and stunning visual style. Much of the film passes by as a strange dream. The characters are often kept at an unsettling distance, key raids are shot in the metallic blue of night, and characters are often caught in ritualised confrontation against various light sources and noirish backdrops.

Other pluses are the good solid performances from Michael Boatman as the put-upon young rookie, and Lori Petty as his equally beset colleague — women are no more popular than blacks amongst the good old boys of the precinct. Also featured are rapper Ice-T and veteran actor Elliott Gould, on either sides of the legal battle that is at the centre of the film.

WILLIAM DART