

FILM

NEW REVIEWS

CRACK HOUSE

You wish Michael Fischa, who directed this as a kind of poverty-row Shakespearean spectacle, would just lighten up and let go. He's too fixed on the fatalistic shadows of his underworld to grind out a suitable Times Square actioner. Through a succession of somber blackouts, the movie follows the strong-arm mores of two crime rings, black and Chicano, in their attempt to control the territory of Cracksville. It centers on the neighborhood street hero and his malleable girlfriend, a beanbag. When he's jailed, she gets shuttlecocked to the rival gang, and before her eventual rescue, she finds herself in sexual bondage to Mr. Bad himself, Jim Brown, whose iconic guest appearance we've been awaiting for half the film. When he finally shows, it's quite a letdown — plunked onto a chalk mark to deliver his obligatory mean-ass lines, he captures the decade's Mae West/Myra Breckinridge Immobility Award. Fischa keeps the plot competently under control, but without momentum or involvement. He can't be called squeamish as he guides us through various rumbles and rapes, but he lacks the necessary crudity to honor his

Lovers & Lunatics is a Canadian movie; only in the home of back bacon, toques and Lorne Greene could Daniel Stern be considered the smooth romantic center of a movie. (Only in Canada could *Friends, Lovers & Lunatics* be considered a movie.) Deborah Foreman valiantly purses her lips as a woman whose path crosses Stern's, in this hapless mishmash of *It Happened One Night*, *My Favorite Wife* and *Moonlighting*. Put it this way: any friend who sends you to this movie is one who'd love to drive you to lunacy. (AAMC Century 14)(Evis Mitchell)

HARLEM NIGHTS

Harlem Nights is writer-director-star Eddie Murphy's *Under the Cherry Moon*. In this numbingly inept caper comedy, Murphy and Richard Pryor play the owners of a swank after-hours gambling joint in 1930s Harlem, and white gangster Bugsy Calhoun (Michael Lerner) wants the upstarts put out of business. While the hotheaded Quick (Murphy) is dodging bullets and attempted frame-ups, wise Sugar Ray (Pryor) cooks up a plan to defraud Calhoun's mob of a cool million in gambling stakes. The movie is set at the end of a fabulous, rich era in urban black culture, and its cast is a multigenerational Who's Who of black performers — Redd Foxx, Della Reese, Robin Harris, Jasmine Guy. (Even Sandman Sims and the inevitable Arsenio Hall turn up in bits.) But Murphy the writer keeps his actors trading witless obscenities, while Murphy the director strands them in lifeless set-ups that leave the production designer's expensive period re-creation just sitting

stabbing and skinning patiently, but you can tell his heart isn't really in it. The filmmakers try valiantly to bring some life to this currently hip classic. They frame the story with a modern-day New York substory; they throw in other gothic mainstays (Jack the Ripper, Masque of the Red Death and Nosferatu); but ultimately the result is mediocre. Andrew Lloyd Webber may have dazzled theatergoers with his adaptation, but horror fans are a tougher bunch. We like our phantoms straight up. (Citywide) (Melanie Pitts)

SOPHIE'S PLACE

Experimental filmmaker Larry Jordan doesn't seem to mind spending five years on a feature-length "in-camera" animated epic whose painstaking process defies the imagination — while at the same time taking it to its outer limits. Since the 1950s, Jordan (a classmate of Stan Brakhage) has been fascinated with both Victorian woodcut-engraving imagery and hand-painted, cutout animation. Obliquely termed "an alchemical autobiography," *Sophie's Place* is a stream-of-consciousness meditation on Sophia, the Greek goddess of wisdom, and the forms she takes in Jordan's surreal *weltanschauung*, where Montgolfier balloons weep into teacups that sprout Victorian ladies, and Eadweard Muybridge's naked male subjects spar with Edison's Dancing Girl. The sequence of images is unrehearsed and unplanned; Jordan obeys "spontaneous poetic" instructions from the universe, so that the

film literally unfolds before us like one long magic act, all unedited. The result is a work of art awesome in its visual beauty and technical wizardry — and thoroughly inexplicable in terms of its intent. Why Greek statues turn into roses or turbaned Moslems against an exquisite hand-painted backdrop of the mosque of St. Sophia in Constantinople, only Jordan can tell us. But who cares? In order to appreciate 90 minutes of Jordan's "unconscious" artistry, all that's necessary is patience, the willingness to check one's left brain at the door, and a good dose of Ecstasy. (Filmforum at LACE, 1804 Industrial St., downtown, Mon., Nov. 20, 8 p.m. Jordan appears in person.) (Mary Beth Crain)

STEEL MAGNOLIAS

This chummy exploitative movie based on the play by Robert Harling, who also wrote the screenplay, grafts bits of *Love Story* onto another of those narratives that expound the Southern Woman as Game Dame theory. Directed by Herbert Ross (*The Goodbye Girl*, *The Secret of My Success*), six of your favorite female stars caper about, firing off spunky one-liners and dissolving into giggles, while sustaining each other through that most durable of Hollywood props, the life-threatening illness. (Their taciturn menfolk, Sam Shepard and Tom Skerritt, look on with numb admiration, grunting occasionally. They're like that in Louisiana.) Sally Field is improbably cast as the controlling mother of Julia Roberts, the Afflicted One. Dolly

Parton is her usual luminously good-natured self as the local hairdresser. (She's capable of much more, if only someone would let her.) And what a pity to see Shirley MacLaine reduced to playing the batty-old-lady routine, hurling invective at one and all as she falls over her dog's leash. It's (just) worth the price of a ticket to see the poised Olympia Dukakis as the elegant, amused widow of the mayor, and Daryl Hannah as (believe it!) the plain young hairdresser's assistant who embraces promiscuity and fundamentalism with equal gusto. The movie's strength is its visual jokes, especially a truly inspired wedding scenario decked out in an insane orgy of pinks ("blush" and "bashful"). (Selected theaters)/(Ella Taylor)

THE STEPFATHER 2

The law of diminishing returns strikes again: if the original *Stepfather* was an unexpected gem of a horror movie, its sequel (*Son of the Stepfather?*), minus the surprises, is just a plain old horror movie. Under the competent direction of Jeff Burr, Terry O'Quinn repeats his brilliant, witty portrayal of a psychopath who's as mild as Mr. Rogers until real life threatens his image of the perfect nuclear family. With nothing to show from his previous attempt at fatherhood but a couple of knife wounds, he escapes from an asylum and heads for a sterile little SoCal property development, starting up a practice as — naturally enough — a marriage and family counselor. He soon sets his eye on a recently divorced woman (Meg Foster) and her young son,