

'Men of Honor' inspirational story of courage

Special to Sentinel-Voice

During World War II and after, Hollywood produced scores of heroic movies with such titles as "Wake Island," "Guadalcanal Diary," "Anzio," "30 Seconds Over Tokyo," "Battle of the Bulge" and "Back to Bataan."

"Men of Honor," which stars Robert De Niro and Cuba Gooding Jr., follows that tradition, but in this case, the enemies are not the Germans and the Japanese. It is the story of one enlisted sailor's battle against bigotry and the unforgiving sea.

"Men of Honor" traces the extraordinary life of Carl Brashear, a Kentucky sharecropper's son who dreamed of a career as a naval diver. He enlisted in the U.S. Navy and, as was customary then with blacks, was assigned to galley duty. President Truman had ordered desegregation of all the services, but the order couldn't halt the bigotry from

both officers and sailors alike.

After two years of writing letters, Brashear was finally admitted to the dive school program. Everything was done to make him fail. Yet against all odds, he graduated as a Navy diver. He suffered a severe injury that under Navy rules would have ended his career, but Brashear fought the rules and won. He achieved the level of master diver and master chief, the highest rank for an enlisted man.

Bill Cosby and Stanley Robertson, who are listed as executive producers, had first seen the Brashear story as movie material in 1994. The project traveled a long road to completion, and just as well. Gooding, who emerged as a major star with his Oscar-winning supporting role in "Jerry Maguire," is the ideal actor to portray Brashear. Not only does Gooding perform the physical demands of the role, he also meets all the

emotional challenges. It is an unforgettable performance.

The role of Brashear's training officer, Billy Sunday (no relation to the famed evangelist), is a composite of superiors Brashear served under and is played by De Niro. Sunday is a bigoted bully, a boozing fighter, a man who delights in flunking out those who do not reach his standards and terrorizes those who do. De Niro infuses the role with all his dynamism. It is his best performance in years.

Surprisingly, the director and writer are virtual newcomers. George Tillman Jr. had directed only one studio feature, "Soul Food" (1997), a moving portrayal of a black Chicago family. With "Men of Honor," Tillman demonstrates his skill at handling human relationships as well as the gripping underwater scenes. The film provides New York

University graduate Scott Marshall Smith with his first produced screenplay. It was a four-year job, and the result is commendable.

One quibble: the courtroom scene of Brashear's final triumph reaches too far for a "Rocky" finish.

Unlike most service movies, this one provides strong roles for women. Charlize Theron fascinates as Sunday's wife, a rare beauty who remains with her brawling, foul-mouthed husband for reasons that are not quite clear. Aunjanue Ellis brings depth to her role as Brashear's wife.

Hal Holbrook does a terrifying turn as a wacko war commander who thunders racial epithets from his tower aerie.

The Twentieth Century Fox release was produced by Robert Teitel and Bill Badalato. Rated R, mostly for language. Running time: 128 minutes.

Adam Sandler descends to new low as devil's son in 'Little Nicky'

By Kam Williams

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Too bad I can't just write: "Little Nicky sucks." This intolerably sophomoric, blasphemous and unimaginative mess actually outdoes Adam Sandler's prior collection of tastelessly retarded title characters (Big Daddy, The Waterboy, Happy Gilmore and Billy Madison). Although I remain dumbfounded by Sandler's review-proof popularity, I also expect Little Nicky to exceed \$100 million in gross receipts, despite another round of near-unanimous critical contempt.

I don't think Adam would be offended in the least if I said he had no identifiable talent other than feigning cretinism. Here, in a dreadfully familiar role, he again plays that shy, awkward, gullible, social misfit but with a slight twist.

This time the lovable imbecile is also the son of The Devil. Satan sends the over-protected Nicky up to Earth to retrieve his reckless older brothers who are out of control and upsetting the balance between Good and Evil in New York City. But Nicky, who had enjoyed a fairly sheltered life below, finds it hard just to survive on the forbidden fruit of the Big Apple's unforgiving streets.

Nicky makes a fast friend in Beefy, a smart-assed pitbull who shows him the ropes. For instance, Beefy shows Nicky how to get even with his precious, gay, actor roommate by asking, "You like acting? I love pissing!" before urinating on his rug.

Patricia Arquette plays love interest Valerie, the stereotypical cute girl who doesn't know she's cute and who doesn't notice that Nicky is a nerd with permanently plastered hair and a contorted

mouth.

You don't have to worry about my spoiling the ending, because I'd have had to be awake to know it. Other than special effects used to create an inexcusably irritating underworld, the movie trades in fairly standard Adam Sandler fare: vomit, defecation, slapstick, homophobic and alcohol-related humor.

The script is the sixth collaboration of the very successful team of Sandler and

Tim Herlihy. They must know something.

Selling their souls to participate on this Sandler project was the greatest waste of prime talent we've seen this year.

The principal roster includes Academy Award nominee Harvey Keitel (for Bugsy), Rodney 'No Respect' Dangerfield (Caddyshack), scene-stealer Rhys Ifans who was so memorable in Notting Hill and The Re-

placements, Patricia Arquette (Ed Wood), Saturday Night Live alumni Jon Lovitz (Small Town Crooks), Dana Carvey and Kevin Nealon (Cecil B. Demented), Oscar-winning actor/writer/director Quentin Tarantino (Best Screenplay for Pulp Fiction) and (Michael McKean (This Is Spinal Tap).

The equally impressive supporting cast was comprised of comedian George Wallace (Catfish in Black

Bean Sauce), Henry 'The Fonz' Winkler (The Waterboy), Carl 'Apollo Creed' Weathers (Rocky), John Witherspoon (of the WB's The Wayan Bros.), Lewis Arquette (patriarch of acting family which has spawned David, Rosanna, Alexis, Richmon & Patricia and TV patriarch of The Waltons), odd-rocker Ozzy Osbourne, basketball great Bill Walton, Regis 'Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?'

Philbin and others.

So, every time I got ready to walk out, I'd get suckered to stay by another cameo surprise.

No one would think that a movie with so many celebrities could be so awful. But be forewarned: it's deadly, you can't watch it. I defy you to try.

Poor (0 stars), Rated PG-13 for mild profanity, gross-out humor, and bizarre sexual situations.

Kam's Film Kapsules

By Kam Williams
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Bounce. Real-life exes Gwyneth Paltrow and Ben Affleck star in bittersweet love story. Man surrenders seat on ill-fated plane to stranger. Gentle Ben goes to comfort the weeping widow but morphs into Genital Ben when he falls for toothy, toothpick Gwen.

Downward Angel. Hell to pay in action thriller with vengeful assassin bent on evening the score with the mobsters who murdered his parents.

How the Grinch Stole Christmas. Jim Carrey (The Mask) goes green again in the screen adaptation of the late Dr. Seuss' tongue-twisting kiddie classic.

Lies. (In Korean with subtitles) Sex and videotape, too. Explicit, erotic tale about a married, middle-aged man who takes up with a teenager he meets via the personals.

Rugrats in Paris. The Pickles do Europe in fast-paced, tykes-eye-view sequel to successful animated feature based on the Nickelodeon kiddie cartoon series. Voicework for new characters supplied by by Susan Sarandon, John Lithgow, Tim Curry, Casey Casem and Debbie Reynolds.

The Sixth Day. Arnold Schwarzenegger fights his evil clone in a sci-fi/action blockbuster. We'll be back!

You Can Count on Me. Broken home drama about an unwed mom already cheating on her fiancée with boss Matthew Broderick. Featuring 11 year-old Rory Culkin, brother of recently-separated Macauley.

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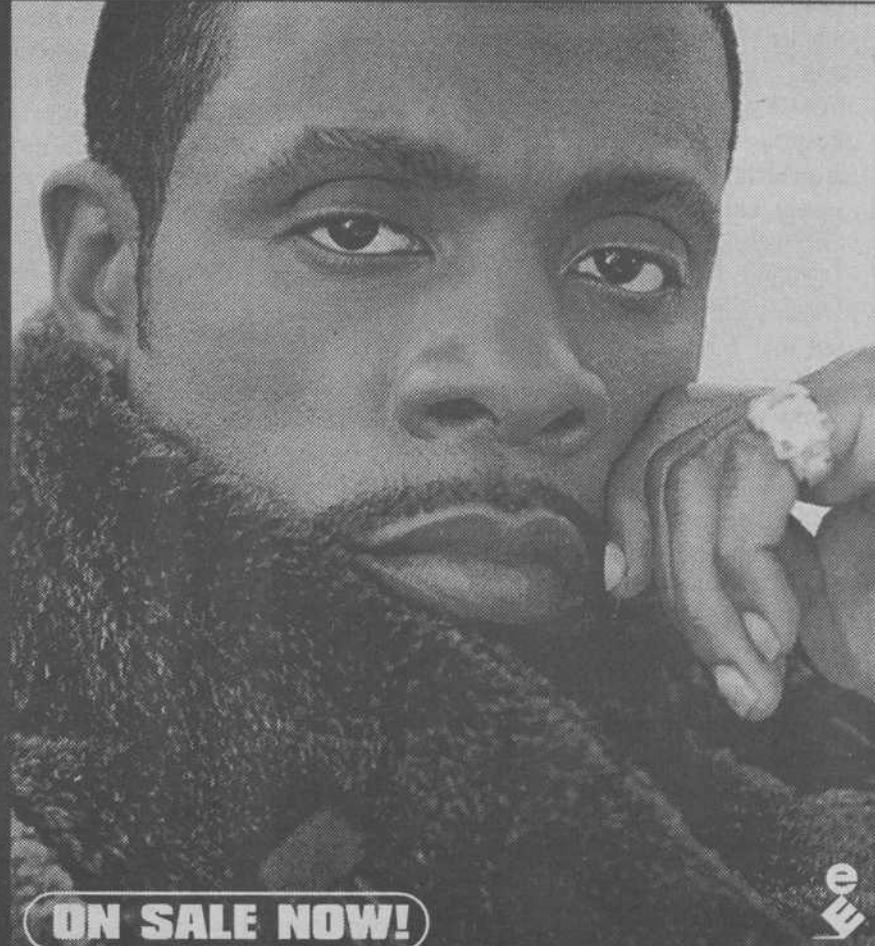
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