

Regret, redemption power new family reunion drama

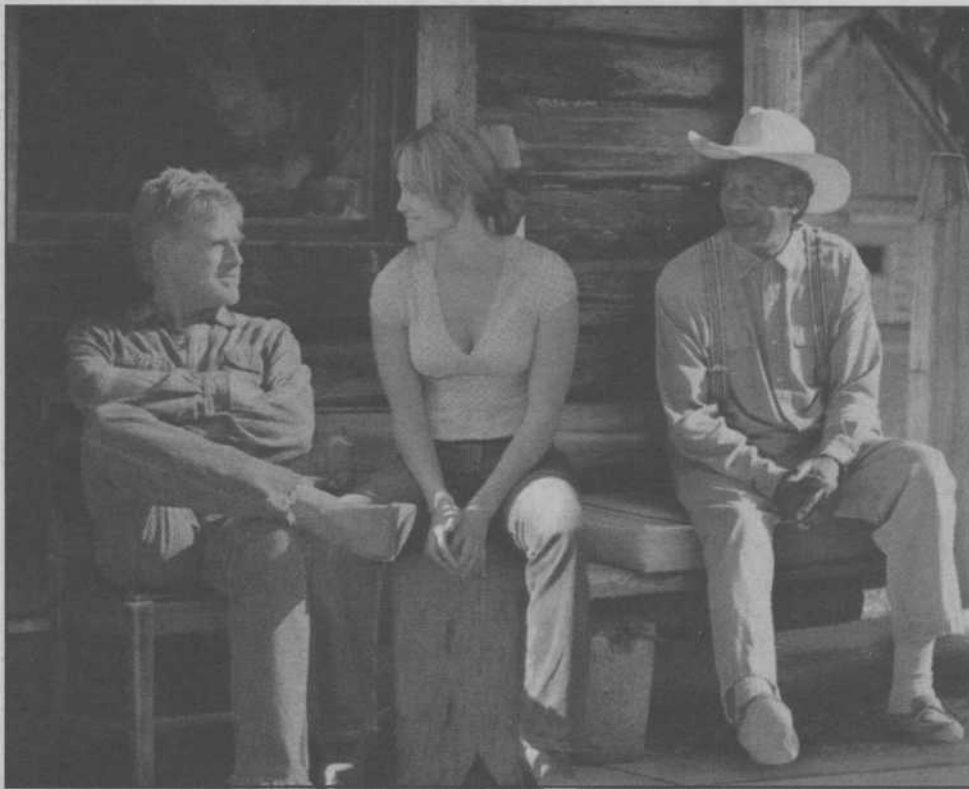
By Kam Williams
Sentinel-Voice

Jean (Jennifer Lopez) has been stuck for two years in an abusive relationship with Gary (Damian Lewis), a creep who seizes on any excuse to hit his cowering girlfriend. After the latest round of pummeling leaves her black-and-blue, the beleaguered single-mom is reminded by her daughter, Griff (Becca Gardner), of her promise to flee, if he ever touched her again.

Therefore, the two take temporary refuge at a battered women's center. Soon, scary Gary shows up, insisting his punching bag return home, making it clear he won't take "No!" for an answer. Wisely, Jean decides to disappear, so she quits her minimum wage job at the local dry cleaner and heads out of town in her beat-up jalopy, 11-year-old in tow.

Without much of a plan, they escape a couple of states away to a remote region of big sky country in Ishawooa, Wy., where they show up, unannounced, at the spacious ranch of Einar Gilkyson (Robert Redford).

However, the reluctant



Singer-actress Jennifer Lopez, middle, and Academy Award winner Morgan Freeman, right, provide big-name recognition to Lasse Halstrom's movie, "An Unfinished Life."

old geezer is not enthusiastic about this sudden appearance of his former daughter-in-law, since he still hasn't forgiven her for being behind the wheel during the car accident that claimed his 21-year-old son's (also named Griff) life.

What irascible Einar can't resist, however, is the carrot

dangled in front of his face in the form of the young granddaughter he previously had no hint even existed, especially since she resembles her late father. Thus, he takes them in, though we see that he has never managed to move past the loss, still making a daily ritual of visiting Griff, Sr.'s grave.

Otherwise, the retired cowboy divides his days between tending to a few animals and caring for Mitch (Morgan Freeman), a hired hand in need of morphine injections since being mauled by a grizzly bear about a year ago.

This somewhat cluttered picture is further clouded by

the introduction of a couple other principal characters. One is Nina (Camryn Manheim), the kindred soul who gives Jean a job as a waitress at her diner. The other is Crane (Josh Lucas), the handsome sheriff/knight in shining armor who knows how to treat a woman right and how to protect her from a stalker.

This somewhat over-plotted scenario underpins "An Unfinished Life," a deliberately-paced, modern-day Western from three-time Oscar-nominee Lasse Halstrom. The Swedish director's impressive résumé reveals a host of other convoluted ensemble pieces, such as "The Cider House Rules," "What's Eating Gilbert Grape," "My Life As a Dog," "Chocolat," and "The Shipping News." But this movie might be more memorable for another Hallstrom hallmark, visually-enchancing cinematography, than for its character-driven storyline. For the film's distracting flaw is simply that Jennifer Lopez is easily outclassed by co-stars Robert Redford and Morgan Freeman.

While she has proven herself capable of handling for-

mulaic romantic comedy, this outing exposes J-Lo as not quite ready for material calling for more emotional depth. One can only wonder how her material might have fared in the hands of a more accomplished actress, instead of an icon hired because of her rabid fan base.

Finally, a quick memo to Freeman who turns in a decent performance, but playing, for the third time this year (after "Million Dollar Baby" and "Danny the Dog"), the all too familiar role of the kindly, pitiable, impoverished, physically-disabled philosopher full of sage advice for others that he never puts to use on his own behalf. Maybe it's time to try a different role before you find yourself hopelessly typecast.

In sum, while "An Unfinished Life" doesn't measure up to the best of Lasse Halstrom's work, it is, nonetheless, an easy on the eyes, panoramic production with a compelling enough plot to remain recommended.

Very Good (3 stars). Rating: PG-13 for profanity, domestic violence, vigilante frontier justice and mature themes.

Diddy, Jay-Z pledge \$1 million to Red Cross for Katrina relief push

NEW YORK (AP) - Sean "Diddy" Combs and Jay-Z have pledged \$1 million to the American Red Cross to help victims of Hurricane Katrina.

The two rappers announced their joint donation Thursday, saying they hoped to inspire others, especially Blacks, to give.

"This is our community," Shawn "Jay-Z" Carter told The Associated Press by phone. "When I turn on CNN, I see a lot of Black people on the streets. I know it's other people too, but those projects have been hit hard."

Combs agrees. "We are all descendants from each other's families. When you hear

Black people say 'brothers' and 'sisters,' it's really true. These are all people that I know I'm related to somehow, some way — the human race family."

Former New Orleans Mayor Marc Morial, now president of the Urban League, said Thursday that those left in the city "are people who are African-American mostly but not completely, and people who were of little or limited economic means. They are the folks, we've got to get them out of there."

Jay-Z said he had put in calls to NBA star LeBron James and rapper Kanye West for donations.



MO' MONEY

Katt Williams, who rose to notoriety via his "Money Mike" persona on Ice Cube's "Friday After Next" and can be seen on Nick Cannon's weekly comedy show, "Wildin' Out" on MTV, performed Sunday as part of the Young Guns of Comedy at the Aladdin.



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