

phoning it in at times, relying on all the moves that were more effective (*Reservoir Dogs*) or scarier (*Bad Lieutenant*) in other movies. The depiction of Los Angeles as a city hanging by its fingernails is effective, and the film's noir-ish touchstones are clear, but in the end, all of these things are what lead to its demise. *City of Industry* tries so hard to put itself in the league of classic crime dramas and difficult morality tales of revenge and sacrifice, it ends up copping all its moves, and has little to offer on its own.

-James Keast

KAMA SUTRA
(DIR. MIRA NAIR)

In the West, the "art of love" as a formally codified system dates from the Middle Ages, but another treatise — India's *Kama Sutra*, meaning "teachings of love" — dates back to the fourth century. In her latest feature, *Kama Sutra: A Tale of Love*, Indian filmmaker Mira Nair (*Salaam Bombay*, *Mississippi Masala*) accomplishes what is undoubtedly one of the longest-awaited cinematic adaptations of erotic literary history, in the process contriving a film at once intelligent and very sexy. The millennia-old erotic textbook lends its title to the story of Maya (Indira Varma), servant and friend to princess Tara (Sarita Choudry) in the royal court of 16th century India. Beautiful, self-

aware and chafing in her hand-me-down clothes, Maya achieves a measure of equality with Tara by learning the techniques of the *Kama Sutra* and becoming chief courtesan to King Raj Singh (Naveen Andrews, *The English Patient*), an opium-addicted sensualist, but this "revenge" comes only at enormous cost to both her and her true love, court sculptor Jai Kumar (Ramon Tikaram).

men in her life, and therefore a form of "equality," but men like King Raj remain the masters all the same, retaining the power of life and death. In the end, "true love" is defeated by death, and for Maya, all that remains is life.

-Russ Kilbourn

KISSED
(DIR. LYNNE STOPKEWICH)



It's no secret that *Kissed* is about the necrophilic obsessions of a young woman. Perhaps more surprising is that the predilections for the dead of the pretty young heroine, Sandra (Molly Parker), is handled with so much discretion that it risks neutralizing the very taboo it seeks to explore. Beyond question, the sexual actor of the film is Sandra; she seems so sure of herself that it normalizes the audience's perception of her tastes as well. *Kissed* re-humanizes the dead as Sandra's erotic impulses stem from an almost angelic and some-

times melancholy response to the lingering souls she senses on the bodies. That the series of corpses we see her with are all young, handsome men without any indication of death save a gothic pallor and closed eyes serves to sanitize the taboo. (Her first sexual encounter with a human corpse takes place in the safety and cleanliness of a hearse going through the car wash. First *Crash*, now *Kissed* — are we witnessing the birth of a Canadian sexual obsession?) The story has two trajectories. The first is the development of Sandra's obsession with dead animals and their ritual burial during her adolescence. While her girlfriend can be convinced to seek out and bury dead furies with her, she cannot be drawn into a celebratory, almost sexualized way of relating to them. A voice-over interprets these early scenes from the point of view of an older Sandra beginning to appreciate her own desire seen as deviance in the eyes of others. The film then jumps ahead to Sandra as an older teenager with a job at the local funeral home as an embalmer-in-training. The second story picks up on Sandra in college studying embalming, where she has her first affair with a live person, Matt. She tells him about her necrophilia as an opening salvo in their first conversation and he seems intrigued. However, he soon becomes obsessed with

Unlike its Western analogues, the *Kama Sutra* acknowledged the interrelation of soul and body in love as an ultimately metaphysical experience where the carnal plays an essential — not to mention highly pleasurable — role. In transforming this ancient erotic rule book into a sumptuously coloured, yet realistically tactile, narrative, Nair turned as much to the philosophical *Kama Sutra* as to the better-known chapter detailing the 27 positions. In addition, the screenplay incorporates a variety of literary allusions, from the *Baghavat Gita* to Shakespeare. But Nair's concerns as a storyteller lie equally in the contemporary sexual/political arena. *Kama Sutra* on the one hand reacts against the perversely hypocritical representation of women and sexuality in the films of "Bollywood," and on the other, speaks to the complexities of daily life for women in post-colonial India. Nair maintains that it is not the eroto/exotic visual potential of the *Kama Sutra* that interested her so much as the possibility, embodied by the theory and practice of love, for a woman to wield what is, in some cases, the only form of "power" available to her. In terms of the film's narrative specifics, however, Maya may acquire a temporary (sexual) power over the

G E S

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Ooooh... I can't wait!



HARD EIGHT

(DIR. P.T. ANDERSON)

If *Star Wars* forever changed the face of commercial American cinema, *Pulp Fiction* proved 20 years later that that face need not necessarily be blandly predictable; that it could even be both ugly and sexy at the same time. Nevertheless, whatever was good in *Pulp Fiction* has not, by and large, made it into P.T. Anderson's writing and directing debut *Hard Eight*, which is, despite its ambitions, no taut film noir. More like derivative and enervated "Tarantinoir," *Hard Eight* (a gambling term for a high-stakes blackjack bet) even has a leading man who looks like Quentin's younger, less intelligent brother — no disrespect to John C. Reilly, who does a credible job of appearing to be basically stupid, as does Gwyneth Paltrow, who is mostly wasted (that is, ill-used) as an under-educated Reno cocktail waitress-cum-hooker with the improbable name of Clementine (yes, a character actually says, "Oh my darling..."). Sydney (Philip Baker Hall) is the seasoned gambler with a dark secret, an even darker suit, and really dark bags under his eyes who becomes far more than just a gambling mentor to John. Sydney starts off promisingly, like a '90s version of Melville's enigmatic *Confidence Man*, as interested in sharpening other people's ethical sensibilities as in turning a profit, but with something vaguely sinister lurking just beneath the undertaker's suit, or behind the Bassett hound complexion. *Hard Eight* gets its only real boost from Samuel L. Jackson as Jimmy, a flashy and obnoxious Reno operator who has the least screen time, but manages to avoid a simple reprise of *Pulp*'s Jules the hitman. In the end, the film's misguided attempt to replace the wise cracks and gunplay with sententious moralizing becomes too much

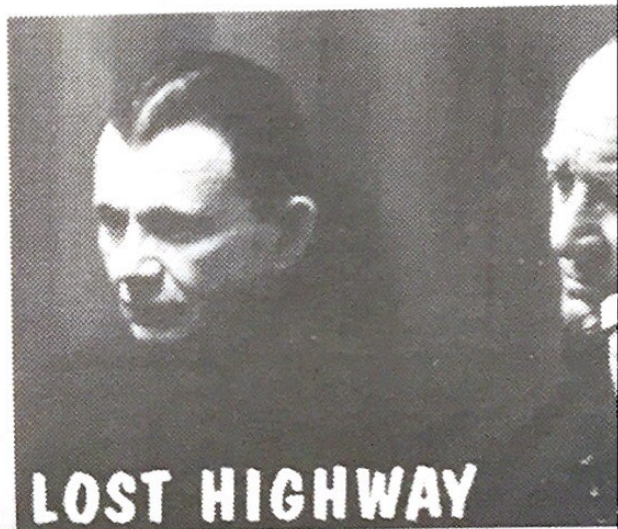
for even dour Sydney to bear. But the final burst of violence, I'm sorry to say, is too little and too late to save us.

-Russ Kilbourn

LOST HIGHWAY

(DIR. DAVID LYNCH)

There is only so much a David Lynch film can give you — like a noir-ish psychosexual pot luck dinner, you bring what you can, and are surprised by what else, and who else, is there. This is probably why so few people feel indifferent toward him as a director and storyteller — there's no easy way to explain *Eraserhead* or *Blue Velvet* to someone who doesn't make the leap from conventional filmmaking into the Lynch Zone, and with *Lost Highway* Lynch has made his most challenging film since his 1972 *Eraserhead* debut. It's a difficult film, following two connected narratives that explore themes of identity, good and evil,



voyeurism, the supernatural, the cyclical nature of existence, and just plain weirdness — classic David Lynch, all. Lynch pulls out all the stops for this one, and his combination of visual signifiers, cinematography that explores the shadows and darkness of film noir, and narrative (at times) incoherence that requires the viewer to simply go along for the ride, results in a film that is at times difficult to watch and harder to absorb. What makes it a success (to fans of the Lynch Zone) is not its inher-

ALBINO ALLIGATOR

(DIR. KEVIN SPACEY)

One of the most interesting questions out of Hollywood in 1995 was "Who is Keyser Soze?" Keyser Soze, insofar as he existed at all, might have been the same person as the crippled, small-time confidence man Verbal Kent, played by Kevin Spacey (the initials, perhaps, give it away). After *The Usual Suspects* and an Academy Award for best supporting actor, few were left wondering who Kevin Spacey was. Spacey's reputation as a film actor was cemented in subsequent productions, like actor-turned-director Al Pacino's *Looking For Richard*, which debuted last September at the Toronto Film Festival alongside something called *Albino Alligator*, Kevin Spacey's first foray into the field of directing. It is a low-budget, small-scale, claustrophobic hostage drama set almost entirely in a New Orleans basement bar. And if Keyser Soze was most conspicuous in his absence from *The Usual Suspects*, Spacey the director is the opposite: apart from a flashy overhead shot during the opening car chase, the director's hand is all but invisible. What Spacey's inexperience as a director tends to reveal is itself (watch for a scene involving a dart). In more than that instance, Spacey misses out on a potential ironic punch (in a screenplay with several characters with secrets to divulge) by underestimating his audience's ability to keep up and pay attention. Spacey's conventional directing style also contributes to the overall stage-play effect of *Albino Alligator*, with its single location and ensemble cast. The screenplay (by newcomer Christian Forte) is described by Spacey as having a "very 'American' plot" — which apparently means that it calls to mind any number of other American mov-

ies. Much of *Albino Alligator* does feel comfortingly familiar, in the way that tense hostage dramas do, but this ends up being more of a liability than an asset. The air of predictability emanates from the central relationship between Dova (Matt Dillon, who appeared in at least three films at last year's festival) and his brother Milo (Gary Sinise), who, along with the requisite psychopath, comprise an inept trio of criminals. The three, having botched a straightforward robbery, wind up, a couple of dead cops and a serious case of mistaken collective identity later, barricaded after hours in the single-entrance former speakeasy, with Janet (Faye Dunaway), the middle-aged-but-still-attractive heroine, the bartender, and an assortment of patrons, including a guy named Guy with a very pronounced French Canadian accent (one distinctly unusual detail in an otherwise typically "American" plot). Which brings us to the film's strange title which, unlike Steve Buscemi's *Trees Lounge* (yet another directorial debut from an actor at this year's festival), is not the name of the bar in which Dova and company find themselves. The reference apparently comes out of the story's (nearly invisible) Cajun background: to "albino alligator" is, in billiards, to sacrifice a ball to block your opponent's shot, thereby ensuring your own win. But the ultimate source of the expression is the world of alligator behaviouralism, where the "oddball" albino reptile is sacrificed by its peers for the collective good. Inevitably, this is sort of what happens in the film, only not quite the way the posse had planned, but by then it's really not much of a surprise. For his next project, Spacey says he would like to try something "bigger and faster — maybe with four locations." For my part, I'll take *The Usual Suspects*.

-Russ Kilbourn