

## THE GINGERBREAD MAN

(DIR. ROBERT ALTMAN)

The sheer size and scope of Robert Altman's filmography imposes an additional challenge on the reviewer: do you judge his latest film on the basis of his previous work, or in a larger cinematic context? The difference is relevant if only because even a lesser Altman is better than a lot of the other dreck out there, and, given a career that includes *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, *Nashville*, and *The Player*, *The Gingerbread Man* is clearly not among the director's best. Why this should be so is due mostly to the source material: an "original story" by John Grisham. It has to be said, though, that in adapting himself to the exigencies of Southern Gothic legalistic film noir, Altman sacrifices too many of the formal features that comprise his signature style, which is as much about point-of-view as about story, allowing the story to be conveyed that much more effectively. There is certainly little to complain about with *The Gingerbread Man's* cast: Kenneth Branagh in the lead role of Rick Magruder, a "golden boy" criminal lawyer, does an entirely credible Southern accent; Embeth Davidtz (*Schindler's List*) is seductive but trashy as love interest Mallory Doss; Robert Duvall brings a strange dignity to the role of a schizophrenic backwoods cult leader, and Mallory's father. Unfortunately, Altman's typically "dialogic" camera and sound work is scrapped in the interest of the necessarily limited point-of-view of the thriller, in which things are only gradually revealed, and the pay-off correspondingly smaller. By the time *The Gingerbread Man* concludes, the story has long since peaked; the "real"

climax is as unsatisfying as the terribly cynical conclusion of *The Player* is satisfying. Of course *The Gingerbread Man* is not supposed to be a satire, but, by the inevitable comparison, the cheap redemptive note in Magruder's chastened outlook at the end rings off-key. It will also disappoint any fans of the title nursery rhyme, where the hero gets his head bitten off by the fox.

-Russ Kilbourn

## THE HOUSE OF YES

(DIR. MARK WATERS)

The tail end of 1997 was a particularly unpleasant stretch for the Kennedys, who endured Seymour Hersh's book about JFK's indomitable libido, nasty comments from former pal Gore Vidal and the death of the disgraced, but still young and handsome Michael Kennedy. Farcical though it may be, *The House of Yes* adds insult to injury. A sort of "Nightmare on Pennsylvania Avenue," *The House of Yes* is another chapter in the decline of the American ruling class, casting the Kennedys as the ultimate in dysfunctional families in the shape of the Pascal family, a clan of Kennedy wannabes who tumbled from the ranks of Washington's elites with the assassination of JFK. Twenty years after JFK's death, Marty Pascal (Josh Hamilton) brings his sweet, guileless girlfriend, Lesly (Tori Spelling) home to meet the family for Thanksgiving. His mother (Genevieve Bujold), a boozy, fatalistic



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## ALIEN RESURRECTION

(DIR. JEAN-PIERRE JEUNET)

The *Alien* series has been one of the most critically and commercially successful franchises in sci-fi history, so it comes as no surprise that Lt. Ripley would not be allowed to rest in peace eternally following her noble demise in *Alien 3*. Ripley is cloned from cells preserved from her body at her death 200 years earlier, turning her into an incubator for the aliens she spent her previous incarnation destroying. But when was the last time over-ambitious, hubristic scientists did not precipitate disaster in an event movie? The mad scientist plot is just one of several genres *Alien Resurrection* patches together in its narrative fabric. It's also a heist movie and most ingeniously, an escape movie that lifts brilliantly from *The Poseidon Adventure*. It's all of a piece with director Jean-Pierre Jeunet's (*Delicatessen*, *The City of Lost Children*) ambivalent, Terry Gilliam-inspired vision of the future. In Jeunet's hands, the aliens become literally more human in pure predatory cunning, while Ripley becomes literally less human, a neat conceit of doubleness worthy of John Woo. For her part, Weaver clearly relishes playing the reconstituted Ripley, delivering her lines with the grim humour and appreciation of irony you might expect of someone who's been dead 200 years. Jeunet riffs on familiar themes, but succeeds in making *Alien Resurrection* his own; it's possibly the least bone-headed of all the Christmas blockbusters.

-Chris Wodskou

## A CHEF IN LOVE

(DIR. NANA DJORDJADZE)

As the full title of this convivial pan-European co-production suggests, *The Thousand and One Recipes of a Chef in Love* concerns itself primarily with those few things – haute cuisine, fine wine, love, and letter-writing – that are truly important, and that add up to that bigger, more nebulous thing; what it is to be 'French.' Other subjects, such as early 20<sup>th</sup> century revolutionary politics, are treated by Georgian director Nana Djordjadze and husband-screenwriter Irakli Kvirikadze as annoying obstacles to the proper enjoyment of the foregoing. And when 'French' and Soviet, respectively embodied by Pascal Ichak

(French comedian Pierre Richard), chef, gourmand and lover, and Zigmund (Temour Kamkrahdze), failed cook turned Bolshevik, come together, the result is bad for both. In the short term, Pascal's heroic epicureanism is no match for the political power wielded by the brutish Zigmund, now leader of the Communist invaders of Tbilisi. That their clash is essentially over a woman, Princess Cecilia (Nino Kirtadze), proves the danger of confusing pleasure and politics. Although the film's pace flags towards the end, *A Chef in Love* succeeds in proving its central thesis by means of the present-day framing narrative within which the main story is artfully folded. Cecilia's now middle-aged son Anton (Jean-Yves Gautier) discovers the manuscript of his mother's correspondence with Pascal, in which the truth of their sybaritic relationship emerges amidst a thousand-and-one recipes. But the triumph of love and good food over the forces of communism would have been more dramatic if history hadn't already proved the prescience of those who, like Pascal, put bread before bullets.

-Russ Kilbourn



## KISS OR KILL

(DIR. BILL BENNETT)

After the small-time, would be Bonnie and Clyde duo of Nikki and Al accidentally kill one of their marks, they flee on a road trip across the Australian outback pursued by the cops. Also on their trail is a pedophile ex-footballer determined to reclaim the stolen porno tape in which he stars. Writer and director Bill Bennett uses this backdrop to question how much any of us really know the people we trust. He spent ten years writing and rewriting the script for *Kiss Or Kill*, which makes the