

'Comet' brings a lifeless year

By Don Strausburger

"It was the last thing on earth they ever expected."

From this promotional catchphrase, the spectator should be on the edge of his seat before the opening credits of "Night of the Comet." This may be the case, until the credits end. Then it is time to sit back, relax, and struggle to enjoy the rest of the movie.

"Night of the Comet" chronicles the events immediately before and after a catastrophe not seen in a mass-media outlet since "The Day After." Instead of nuclear holocaust, though, a comet passes through the earth's atmosphere and vaporizes the entire world's population except for several hopelessly boring characters. After about 15 minutes of pre-comet activities, the plot carries the viewer immediately to the next morning, as if he knows what happened in the few eliminated hours.

Eventually, the screenwriter lets the audience in on what has happened and, because of the film's occasional attempts at gruesome effects, disappointment grows over the potentially great special effects that were probably left on the cutting room floor. Instead of seeing the people vaporizing (could have been fun to watch!) and fantastic car crashes, we only see the final result: streets and yards filled with vacated clothes and small piles of red dust presumed to have been humans the previous night but no cars. We find out what happened through the eyes of Reggie, an 18-year-old girl who is more interested in a video game at the theater in which she works than the family members who are nothing more than dust.

Other than vaporization, the comet's devastation yields two possible results -- either no physical change or deterioration of the skin and a villainous disorientation of the mental capacity. The people, exposed to the comet, are comparable to some of the less influential monsters and villains of earlier teen horror films. This sets up the classic teen horror scenario -- the few survivors trying, at first, to avoid and, eventually, destroy the inhuman beings.

The three main characters: Reggie; her younger sister, Samantha, a stereotypical cheerleader who lives in the shadow of her sister's good looks; and Hector, a young truck driver whose only roles in the movie are to give Reggie and Samantha a man over whom they can fight and eventually save the two sisters from a group of scientists who have been exposed. The three must not only escape from the scien-

tists' underground experiment facility but also destroy the scientists. After successfully doing this and, in the meantime, saving two young children, the group makes the stereotypical matinee-idol exit walking off into the sunset.

"Night of the Comet" spends approximately 90 minutes trying to be a good science fiction film, but also tries to be a good teen thriller, an adventure epic, and even a romance. Unfortunately, there are not enough hours to be good at every type of story unless meals and sleeping accommodations are provided with the ticket. As a result, the film ends up being a mediocre science-fiction thriller most of the time with the remaining moments being entirely meaningless.

One of the interesting things about this movie is its ability to stockpile many of the problems of modern movies throughout its 90 minutes. Among the leading problems are the characters. Several portions of the dialogue give the impression that the characters may be worthy of the viewer's emotional support; however, they always revert to being transparent, stereotypical Los Angeles teens who could care less about the entire situation. The two sisters never even show any emotional dismay after their whole family is eliminated. Only Hector shows a feeble attempt at emotion when he goes to his parent's house to see if anyone survived.

Another of the evident problems is a lack of any continuity in scenes. There is no logical progression of action throughout the entire film, although the plot is so obvious that continuity is probably not necessary. For example, the film shows the two girls blissfully shopping in an exclusive department store. Then, it cuts to Hector's arrival at his parent's house and his being chased by one of the exposed victims. The transition brings one of the few light, enjoyable moments to a screeching halt.

The key to building excitement and suspense in movies is a task of the director but mostly of the editor. In movies like "Psycho" and "Vertigo," Alfred Hitchcock and his editors build colossal suspense very effectively by showing only the victim or the weapon about to be used instead of the killer which has become popular with the "Friday the 13th" genre. However, "Night of the Comet" builds suspense with uninteresting music and uninspired editing. You sit and anxiously await a scary scene which is so over- or underplayed that it never quite hits its

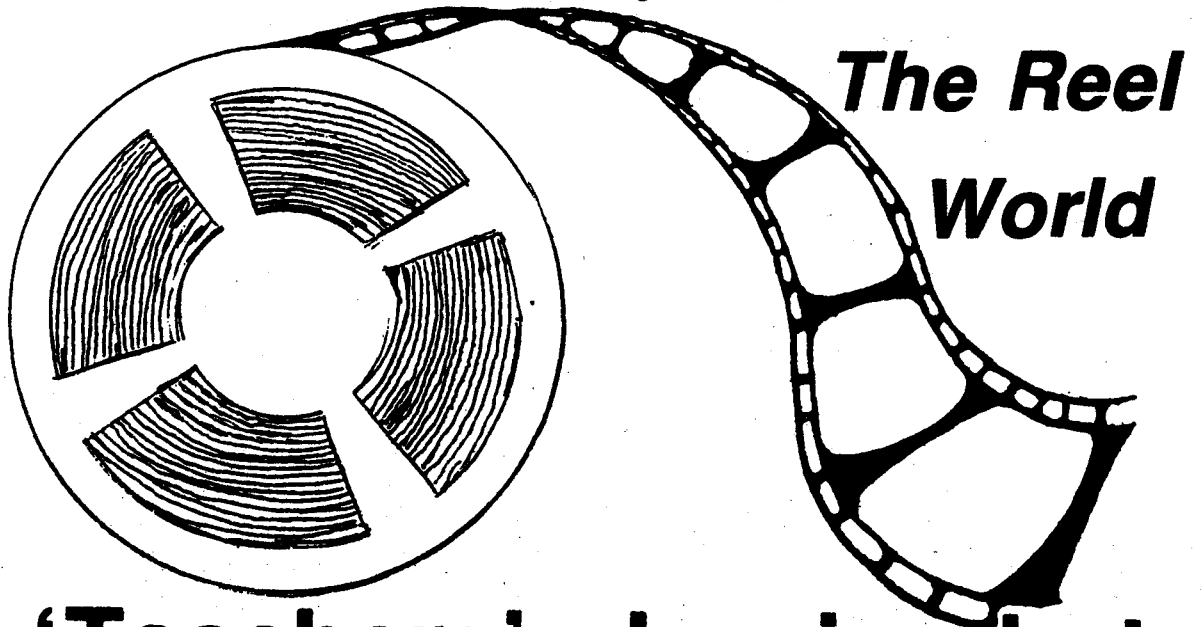
full potential. After two or three occurrences, these scenes become predictably boring like the rest of the film and the concept of fear is entirely lost.

In its attempt to be occasionally realistic, the film raises too many questions about the attempt. For example, the morning after the comet's destructive pass, Reggie drives home

on her deceased boyfriend's motorcycle. The streets are strangely void of wrecked cars. If everyone was killed simultaneously, why were there no piles of wrecked cars in the streets or cars that crashed into buildings? And if the heat generated as the comet passed was great enough to vaporize the people, why were none of the material things of society

melted? There are too many discrepancies throughout the movie to make it even slightly plausible.

"Night of the Comet" is by far one of the most inferior projects which I have seen this year. The film had a great deal of potential which was never reached in acting as well as directing and editing.



'Teachers' pleasing but too predictable

By Tony Perry

It seems that quite a few of the people who attend movies on a regular basis are teenagers.

Or, at least it would seem that way from the way many recent movies are written, performed, filmed and soundtracked. Take for example "Teachers," the latest MGM/UA release.

An attempt at "Welcome Back Kotter" with an "R" rating, the classic battle between idealism and surrender to an unfair bureaucratic system becomes surprisingly charming in the guise of a formerly radical teacher forced to face his lost idealism by a former student who refuses to give up her own. It is the search for a balance between principles and pragmatism that is the thrust of this moralistic script.

But don't be misled by the seriousness of the theme. "Teachers" may be firmly planted atop a soap box, but the teacher in question, Alex Jury (played by the ever unshaven Nick Nolte), is set in a chaotic farce of a high school that comes complete with student stabbings, drug raids, students who bite teachers, a school psychologist that flips out and attacks a teacher... you get the picture.

Nolte and Judd Hirsch, the unspecified school administrator, are disillusioned with the public school system, and have slipped into playing

the bureaucrat game more and listening to their ideals less.

Enter JoBeth Williams, a young lawyer and former student of Nolte's who is representing another former student who somehow graduated without the ability to read and write.

As the film subtly beats in the message of strength through idealism (not unlike a sledgehammer), the audience is introduced to an assortment of characters. Among these is a stereotypical callous school superintendent (played by Lee Grant, who has apparently lost the ability to play nice characters), a stereotypical gym teacher with an overactive libido, a stereotypical principal with no guts, a stereotypical hoolum (Ralph Macchio) with a reading problem, and other assorted predictable people designed to bring comic relief to the film.

Surprisingly, the stereotypes serve to increase the humor in the film and several of the performers, most notably Macchio, create endearing personas, in spite of the obvious conclusion.

Nolte's performance, though an extension of the character he has been perfecting since "Rich Man, Poor Man," is surprisingly effective, and viewers actually become concerned with his internal conflict. His sarcastic nature and casual appearance help create the image

of a youth who is aging in spite of himself, and is very easily accepted by those still too young to understand his intentions.

Not everything in the film works as well, however. Because of the generally condescending nature of the script, too much time is spent explaining the basic premise, as if teenagers in an urban school would not know there was a problem with the public education system in this country. The heavily-promoted rock soundtrack worked well in several transitional scenes, but was obtrusive far too often to contribute to the movie.

Neither of these are as disappointing as the weak climax, during which Williams disrobes in the school hallway. Stock climaxes like this only work in movies with no socially redeeming value, and Williams is much too good of an actor to bare her breasts in every movie she makes. (Why does she do this?)

Although the cinematography fluctuates between good and mediocre, "Teachers" is a pleasant little film that makes the most of some very old cliches. But in spite of its "R" rating, the movie contains relatively little of the gore and explicit sexuality that brings teenagers into theaters these days. This is a mixed blessing, because "Teachers" is blatant enough to get its message across to those adolescents who will ignore it because of its tact.