

## Film: Suburban Satire; Nerd Meets Mafioso

By JULIE SALAMON

It's been a long dry spell for movies. How excited can we get when two of Hollywood's best pictures this year — "Unforgiven" and "Hero" — are throwbacks to another time?

Well, the movies aren't over just yet. Original film makers continue to emerge, offering to reinvent the world for us in ways we haven't imagined before. For example, just one year out of Columbia University's film school comes Stacy Cochran, who wrote and directed "My New Gun," an accomplished satire of American suburban life.

The gun makes its entrance right at the beginning, when a man tells the married friends he's visiting about the engagement gift he bought his fiancée — a gun, with her name engraved on the handle. The husband's reaction is immediate. He wants to buy a gun for his woman, too. Her reaction is equally quick. No, she says.

He buys the gun anyway, and then unsuccessfully tries to teach his wife to use it. After that it remains out of sight for most of the movie — though its presence is always felt.

Ms. Cochran makes it clear at the outset that her gun is going to trigger something far sneakier and more inventive than the usual movie gunplay. Her married couple — Gerald (Stephen Collins), a handsome radiologist, and Debbie (Diane Lane), his pretty wife — live by the side of a golf course in a house that is identical to all the houses around it. They and their belongings look so perfectly untouched they seem cut from a magazine ad. Yet Gerald is a lout in his clean-cut way. When he breaks a glass preparing drinks for guests, he wails for his wife from the kitchen. "Deb, could you . . ." he says as he brushes by her. He doesn't have to say anything more. She immediately stoops to sweep up the mess.

Ms. Cochran deftly makes the point that Gerald's desire for the gun isn't for safety. By the time he explains that without the gun he feels "totally unprotected," the director has already established that he couldn't live in a more placid place than he does, out there by the golf course. To be



Kati Outinen

more protected he and Debbie would have to be living behind bars.

So what really lies behind his desire for the gun is materialism. He wants the same toy his pal has. This becomes quite clear later, when the same friend who planted the idea for the gun wears a new windbreaker to Gerald's house. Though Gerald is shocked at the price — \$385 — he quickly decides he needs one too. No wonder Debbie always looks vaguely disturbed. No wonder she's ready to ditch the whiny doctor for an elusive neighbor (James LeGros) without really knowing whether he is just a nice guy with a difficult life or something more dangerous.

Ms. Cochran's characters are cloaked in deliberate blandness. No one registers much emotion, though everyone is pointedly polite. With a cool sense of the absurd, she shows us how anesthetized our culture has become to violence — and to emotion.

"In the Soup" is a delightful little picture about a would-be film director who has a big adventure when an impish Mafioso decides to become his patron.

Director Alexandre Rockwell has shot his picture in black-and-white, with a quirky, magical style and ironic humor that manage to conjure happy memories of film makers ranging from Vittorio De Sica and Luchino Visconti to Woody Allen.

Steve Buscemi is Aldolpho, the earnest

artist, and Seymour Cassel is Joe, the con man who has a way of making everything seem like a kick. Mr. Buscemi has a wonderful clown's face — those sad, bulging eyes — and he uses it well. He's skinny and frail; you believe that his dreams are the only thing keeping him aloft until Joe — played vibrantly by Mr. Cassel — comes along.

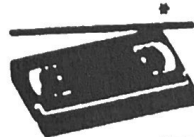
Aldolpho is a film nerd who has gained all his life wisdom from movies. He's infatuated with the woman next door (Jennifer Beals) because she reminds him of Anna Magnani. His idea of big revenge is this: "One day you'll see. I'll put you in a script and it won't be so flattering."

You understand from the snippets of his work he shows Joe that there's a reason he hasn't made a movie yet. For example, he thinks it's a good idea to make Dostoevski and Nietzsche characters in the story of his life. With great ingenuity and a nice sense of mischief, "In the Soup" tells how Joe gives him a better idea.

Until you catch on to Finnish director Aki Kaurismaki's bleak, deadpan humor, you might think his latest film, "The Match Factory Girl," is some weird post-modernist version of that grim fairy tale of suffering and death, "The Little Match Girl."

And maybe it is a wised-up fairy tale. His heroine, Iris (Kati Outinen), has a life so morose it's like a parody of a Scandinavian film. No matter how awful things are, they can get worse and always seem to.

Yet Mr. Kaurismaki is up to something far more clever than mocking or idealizing the suffering of ordinary people. In his absurdist way he leaves open the notion that tragedy can be upended as handily as happiness.



### VIDEO TIP:

Seymour Cassel of "In the Soup" performed in eight films for the late

John Cassavetes, one of the most uncompromising independent movie directors. It's worth watching Michael Ventura's absorbing documentary about the director, "I'm Almost Not Crazy: John Cassavetes — the Man and His Work."