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## MOVIE REVIEW : 'Matinee' an Affectionate Nod to Early '60s Schlock : Joe Dante's comedy shows how teens may have seen the Cuban missile crisis as a real-life, campy, horror film.

January 29, 1993 | PETER RAINER | TIMES STAFF WRITER

As the schlock movie magnate Lawrence Woolsey in "Matinee," John Goodman is paunchy but battering-ram solid. He seems inflated by his own expansiveness. The jumbo cigar he perpetually waves is never lit. It doesn't need to be; Woolsey is the one who is constantly smoking with "ideas."

His latest micro-budget epic is a "cautionary" horror tale about the effects of A-bomb radiation on a man bitten by an ant. Its title--what else--is "MANT" (The ad line is "Half Man . . . Half Ant . . . All Terror!!!"). And so it's poetically perfect that Woolsey, with his wisened-up paramour and leading lady, Ruth (Cathy Moriarty), in tow, arrives in Key West during the height of the Cuban missile crisis to preview his new creation.

Joe Dante, who directed "Matinee" (citywide) from a script by Charlie Haas, has a genuine affection for Woolsey and for the whole madcap schlock-horror world. It's an early '60s world bounded by Famous Monsters and Mad magazines, backed by oldies and crowded with goopy papier-mache humanoids. Dante, who is in his 40s and who also directed the two "Gremlins" movies and "Innerspace," is locked into an adolescent time warp in a way that makes a director such as Steven Spielberg seem positively hoary. He's the movie-maven Peter Pan of film. His freakoid prankishness isn't a put-on; it's the real thing.

"Matinee" (rated PG for language, mild violence and sensuality) isn't as inspired as "Gremlins 2," his last collaboration with Haas, but at its best it's a ticklish nut-brain romp--a crazy quilt of grade-Z horror spoofs.

If the film had concentrated on Woolsey and Ruth and their carnival shenanigans, "Matinee" might have been a low-rent classic. But Dante and Haas are also aiming for "heart." Gene (Simon Fenton), a teen-ager whose father is stationed off the coast of Cuba, is moony for the local high-school radical, Sandra (Lisa Jakub), who yowls during a classroom bomb drill like a pipsqueak Helen Caldicott; they end up kissy-faced inside a bomb shelter. His friend Stan (Omri Katz) is googly eyed over the twinkly Sherry (Kellie Martin), although, to his credit, he cuts out on a boring science-project-style date with her to catch "MANT" on opening day.

This fatherless-kid scenario is boringly Spielbergian, and so is the sappy uplift that attempts to connect the boys' relish for schlock with their coming-of-age in a time of lost innocence. Our movies routinely depict the early pre-assassination '60s as a virginal era, but it's a regrettable cliché.

The scenes from "MANT," shot in black and white, that Dante and Haas have cooked up are some of the best movie satires on film. It's not easy to parody a genre that's already close to self-parody but the filmmakers triumph again and again. Actors such as Kevin McCarthy turn up in cameos for that all important *deja-vu* effect, and the special-effects are imperially tacky. Moriarty, who has a gift for hard-boiled farce in her scenes with Goodman, also appears in the "MANT" footage, and she manages to give a convincingly dreary grade-Z performance while at the same time cluing us in to how ridiculous Ruth must feel to be starring in this nonsense.

Many others in the cast respond to Dante's enthusiastic flakiness. John Sayles and Dick Miller show up as crusaders for Citizens for Decent Entertainment. (Miller surveys the young audience for "MANT" and snarls, "I can smell the wreckage of your minds.") David Clennon pops in for a hilariously clenched cameo as Sandra's politically progressive dad. (Like father, like daughter.) Jesse White, as an old-time exhibitor, has a great comic turn as he stands shiny-eyed in the back of the theater playing "MANT" and proclaims of Woolsey, "He's putting back the showmanship!"

Dante's showmanship has the same spirited effect on us. He pulls out his bag of tricks and even puts in an animated doodle; he's reaching not only for the flagrant awfulness of movies like "MANT" but also for the zippy ardor of the classic Warner Bros. cartoons. He does everything but put a buzzer under your seat.

If he ever gets around to making "MANT 2," maybe he'll do that too.

'Matinee'

John Goodman: Lawrence Woolsey

Cathy Moriarty: Ruth Corday

Simon Fenton: Gene Loomis

Omri Katz: Stan

A Universal Pictures presentation of a Renfield production. Director Joe Dante. Producer Michael Finnell. Screenplay by Charlie Haas.

Cinematographer John Hora. Editor Marshall Harvey. Costumes Isis Mussenden. Music Jerry Goldsmith. Production design Steven Legler. Art director Nanci B. Roberts. Set designer Stephen Alesch. Set decorators Frederick C. Weiler and Eric Weiler. Running time: 1 hour, 47 minutes.

MPAA-rated PG (language, mild violence, sensuality.)