



POPCORN™ Murder By Numbers: Doesn't Add Up to Much

By MICHAEL S. GOLDBERGER
2 popcorns

There is something seductively magnetic about ugliness. Perhaps even more so than beauty. When confronted with it, we turn away in horror, fear and shock, only to guiltily give a quick owl-twist of the neck to peek again...and then maybe again.

Ashamed by said practice since we figure it's a base instinct that drives our curiosity, and because we've been taught that it's impolite to stare, some of us measure our rung on the ladder of civilization by how well we avert our eyes in the presence of such dismaying situations.

"I will not look" you tell yourself when finally coming upon the crash scene on the opposite side of highway no less. It's all those other "animals" slowing down to look that caused the jam. The ugliness can also come in the form of a film, like *Murder by Numbers*.

A distastefully tiring tale about two high school boys obsessed with committing the perfect crime, it should attract its share of rubbernecks and gawkers in search of a cinematic accident, literally and figuratively. Actually though, director Barbet Schroeder's overlong peer into the abyss of two sick minds is nothing more than a contemporary transposition of the Roaring 20's Leopold and Loeb case, and not a very good one at that.

Anyway, if Cassie Mayweather, played by a just so-so Sandra Bullock, is such a world class sleuth, how come she never compares the cold-blooded murder at the heart of these bleak doings to the famous 1924 case? Or maybe she does and I missed it whilst briefly dozing.

Mind you, dear reader, if so it was only momentarily, lest you write me up for falling asleep at the switch. In all due fairness to director Barbet Schroeder, there are some instances when his handling of Tony Gayton's script warrants staying awake. Well, almost.

For one thing, the filmmaker extracts two very fine performances from the young men playing the dastardly duo. Both Ryan Gosling, as Richard Hayward, the high school's Mr. Popular, and Michael Pitt, as Justin Pendleton, the resident genius dork, contribute splendid stints. Ostensibly dysfunction's answer to the odd couple, they are entirely despicable.

Take poor, poor Justin. So smart, yet so lonely. So misunderstood. Then there's poor little rich Richard. So inundated with good looks and material wealth, including a classic Mustang GT. Heck, what new thrills could the world possibly have in store for him?

Is it all their fault? At least that's the cautionary question *Murder by Numbers* has the chutzpah to ask. You see, despite the trappings of opulence, both boys aren't getting much attention at home. I couldn't make it to my daughter's track meet last week. I hope she doesn't become a serial killer.

Please don't waste all your pity on Richard and Justin. Save a little for Bullock's Cassie, the lady gumshoe with a scarred past she'd just as soon keep to herself.

Only thing is, there's an inherent contradiction at work here, and it's the film's most critical flaw. Because it just so happens that

the movie's subtext is everything you always wanted to know about Cassie's deep dark secret. At least it's supposed to just be the subplot.

Doled out piecemeal throughout the grim proceedings and too often overshadowing the icky revelations about our Prince Charming, we learn all about Cassie's abusive ex-spouse.

Some writers think irony is just the cat's pajamas. So they employ it everywhere. And wouldn't you just know it? The MO of this particular murder case practically matches to a tee the circumstances surrounding the detective's personal tragedy of several years ago, except that she escaped with her life.

While this convenient literary mechanism promulgates the notion that there is some great eternal balance at work, in many cases it can compromise credibility. Which is what it does in *Murder by Numbers*. It's the prose version of forsaking the meaning of a poem for the sake of rhyme.

Like the murder victim in question, Cassie was tossed into a ravine by her attacker and left for dead. Flashbacks graphically make the comparisons. A swirl of psychological purports overtakes her with each reminder. We learn that the horrible event is what inspired her to become a cop in the first place. Forever replaying it is at once her weakest and strongest asset.

Thus following these clichés that have been carefully strewn like Hansel and Gretel's crumbs, we inevitably arrive at the ultimate cop story platitude: Cassie's boss, worried that she may be taking this one too personally (even though she always does!), is threatening to take her off the case.

As always, there are the political considerations to take into account, such as all the powerful people young Hayward's rich father controls. Even her kindly new partner in homicide detection, a former vice squad flatfoot played by Ben Chaplin, is questioning her objectivity. Well, he was admonished, "No one wants to be Cassie's partner."

There were also some off-color warnings. But they figure only a little in the film's R-rating.

So, when at long last arriving at film's end, we realize that the screenplay's preoccupation with Cassie has veered us off the track. Yes, we've been shown this movie's midway attraction, rendered aghast by its ugly accident on the side of the road. But to what purpose?

We haven't really delved into the crux of the horror beyond the usual TV magazine maxims.

It is apparent that screenwriter Gayton and director Schroeder really don't have anything very intelligent to add or impart, whether about Richard and Justin, or about Leopold and Loeb, or about what fuels a Columbine, or about anything else for that matter.

In fact, aside from a disturbing look at some rather sick puppies, about the only thing you can count on with *Murder by Numbers* is a Hollywood ending.

Murder by Numbers, rated R, is a Warner Bros. release directed by Barbet Schroeder and stars Sandra Bullock, Ryan Gosling and Michael Pitt. Running time: 120 minutes.



Cheri Rogowsky for *The Westfield Leader and The Times*
TOP SONGWRITERS...The Coffee With A Conscience concert series performance in Westfield on April 20 included the bluesy pop sounds of Dan Pelletier and Jean Bratman. Pelletier was named Best Songwriter of 2001 at the South Florida Folk Festival Songwriting Competition and Bratman is an emerging artist, singer, songwriter, guitarist, piano player, former news reporter for television, radio and newspapers.

Pen & Ink

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 22
that I could possibly give to this thing we call "motherhood". From trying to jam a spoonful of medicine between clenched lips, to soothing those painful moments that took us into the wee hours of the morning to listen and share, to the pots of Sicilian gravy on the stove to offer to anyone Michelle would befriend and to keep those Italian traditions going, to just plain trying my darndest to be a special friend and mother to my special friend and daughter, it has been one heck of a wonderful ride! I can only hope and pray that God keeps me walking and talking for the wonder that lies ahead as I await all the good things coming into Michelle's life! Can't wait!!!!

Writers In Action Program Scheduled

SCOTCH PLAINS - Students in the seventh and eighth grade at Park and Terrill Middle Schools will display their original writings during an evening program entitled, "Writers In Action," on Wednesday, May 15, at the Park Middle School Media Center.

Seventh graders will read original works from 7 to 7:30 p.m., while eighth graders will read their writing from 8 to 8:30 p.m. From 7:30 to 8 p.m., visitors will have an opportunity to take a gallery tour of displays of students' writings. Refreshments will be served.

Clubhouse

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 22
fragrances of peaches and vanilla. An intricate labyrinth blending the elegance and history of antiques with the subtle flavor of popular, contemporary fare, Clubhouse boasts one password for every customer - class.



Get Outta The House

By CAROL F. DAVIS
Specially Written for *The Westfield Leader and The Times*

A single night's benefit performance of the Broadway musical *You're A Good Man Charlie Brown* by the Brick Community Players will be at the Union County College Theatre on Friday, May 31, at 8 p.m. The proceeds from the \$15 admission will benefit the Emmanuel Cancer Foundation, headquartered in Scotch Plains. Much of this show's charm and humor is timeless. Laugh as you get a glimpse of human behavior, and don't be fooled by the simplicity of it all. It's got all the characters you have come to love. Refreshments will be available. Call Monica at 322.4323, extension no. 17 for ticket information.

You may have read about this musician in *The Westfield Leader and The Times of Scotch Plains and Fanwood* before — he is Bob Young. Along with his group, the Friends of Jazz, Young will be performing a special *Jazz and Gospel Tribute to Mothers & Grandmothers* on Saturday, May 11, from 5 to 7:30 p.m. at the Crescent Avenue Presbyterian Church in Plainfield. Purchase tickets in advance at Sound Express in Plainfield, New Brunswick, or Somerville, Scotts Pharmacy in Plainfield, or Our Story Bookstore on South Avenue in Plainfield for just \$7.50 They will be \$10 at the door, or \$5 for seniors, students, and the disabled. Also featured will be Dena Allen, Eller Weas Little, and Gospel Ways.

Also in Plainfield is the not-to-be-missed *9th Annual FOSH (Friends of Sleepy Hollow) Yard Sale* on Sunday, May 19, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Plan to drive your car to one spot on the route of 120 or so homes, noted by balloons, pick up a map, and walk around looking for bargains, antiques, collectibles, bric-a-brac and chachkas all day. This is a perfect opportunity to gather some friends and have some fun. People from all over make it a point to be there. So should you. Rain or shine.

For a unique musical experience, make sure you see the Summit Chorale, New Jersey's oldest active choral group, on Saturday, May 18, at 8 p.m., for their performance of a unique blend of old and new music from Poland. *Finally Heard: The Voice of Poland*, will feature the rarely presented "Miserere" by Górecki, in which Drew University Chorale will join Summit Chorale to form a chorus 100 voices strong. The concert is at the United Methodist Church in Madison on Route 124. Tickets are \$16 and \$11 for seniors and students in advance, and \$18 and \$13 at the door. For tickets and information, call (973) 762-8486 or see www.summitchorale.org.

There will be a *Garden Fair* on May 19 at the Trailside Nature & Science Center, Coles Avenue & New Providence Road in Mountainside. The plant sale & workshops, from noon to 5 p.m., are administered by Union County Master Gardeners. Trained by the Rutgers Cooperative Extension, these guys know what they're doing with plants. Bring your gardening questions. Admission is free.

ARTS ENTERTAINMENT

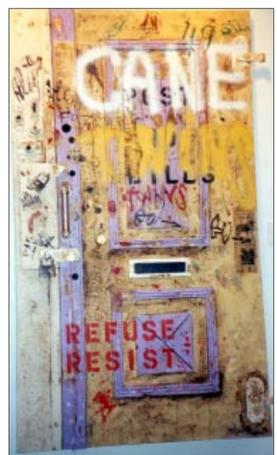
Before Opening A Door, Think Of It As Artwork

By MARYLOU MORANO
Specially Written for *The Westfield Leader and The Times*

SUMMIT — The door. Our fast paced and hectic lifestyles don't allow us to stop and consider its significance. And why should we, anyway? The door is something to go through to get where you are going. You either go in one or

going forward. I came away from the NJCVA exhibit with a new sense of respect for an ordinary convenience I use hundreds of times a day, yet hardly give a thought to.

The exhibit will be open until Wednesday, May 15. The NJCVA is located at 68 Elm Street in Summit. Gallery Hours are from noon to 4 p.m., from Monday to Friday, 7 to 9 p.m. on Thursday evenings and 2 to 4 p.m., Saturday and Sunday. Admission is free. For more information, please call the NJCVA at (908) 273-9121.



Marylou Morano for *The Leader and The Times*
CANVAS DOOR... "Liz Lives Here," an acrylic collage, mixed media on canvas by Burhan Dogançay.

come out one. What's the big deal?

The New Jersey Center for Visual Arts' (NJCVA) exhibit, "Doors: Image and Metaphor in Contemporary Art" will have you thinking about doors in ways you've never imagined.

A mixed media presentation in paint, collage, sculpture video and photography, the display has the viewer pondering the significance of doors in each of our lives as well as the messages they convey.

The artists and their door subjects come from all parts of the world. The global context of the exhibit only underscores the universal themes that doors hold for each of us. All doors, whether placed outside or inside a structure, whether they bid us enter or exit, hold a sense of mystery.

Even familiar doors, doors we pass through many times a day are in many ways mysterious, as one never really knows what one will find on the other side.

The door as art object is an interesting concept. Doors tell stories like that in Holly Lane's acrylic painting set in carved wood panels titled, "Fortuna's Early Formative Years in the South of France."

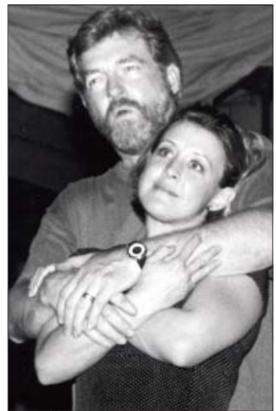
The colors and arrangements of the panels cause one to think about the relationship between fantasy and reality.

Doors comment on social issues. Sculpture Siah Armajani's bronze and aluminum "City Center No. 7" shows three cots lined up in front of two plain, yet at the same time elaborate, doors. Do the cots represent part of a homeless shelter or extra beds in a fancy hotel room?

One interesting photography technique is used by Shimon Attie in his "Writings on the Wall" series of photographs.

"Joachimstrasse 11a Berlin" depicts the photographer's rendition of a Jewish immigrant neighborhood after he has projected on the walls, slides of signs from the city's past. The effect is at the same time eerie as well as sentimental — eerie because Attie projected the signs in the exact locations of where they once were and sentimental because studying the work evokes a feeling of how Berlin may have looked 70 years ago before the horror of the Holocaust.

Several of the works so graphically portray real life as seen through open doors, that it causes one to wonder what would be going on behind closed doors. Possibility, mystery, looking back,



ENCHANTING...Emile de Becque, played by Westfielder Roger Hayden, courts Ensign Nellie Forbush, played by Cindy Jung of Basking Ridge, in the classic romantic musical, *South Pacific*. For more information, please call (908) 276-7611.

Halcyon Trio to Take Stage at St. Paul's

WESTFIELD — Friends of Music at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Westfield will present The Halcyon Trio in concert on Sunday, May 12, at 4 p.m. at the church, which is located at 414 East Broad Street in Westfield.

A trio including clarinet, viola and piano, has enjoyed two international radio broadcasts since forming earlier this year. Collectively, the ensemble has performed with reputable orchestras and has been met with critical acclaim.

Donations will be accepted at the door. For more information, please call Charles Banks at (908) 232-8506, extension no. 17.

Grand Finale

May 11, 2002

Sponsored By The Friends of the Westfield Symphony Orchestra

The Presbyterian Church in Westfield • 8:00 PM

Verdi
AIDA
Opera in Concert

WESTFIELD SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

David Wroe
Music Director & Conductor

PERFECT MOTHER'S DAY GIFT

TICKET INFORMATION

General Admission:
Adults - \$25.00 Seniors - \$22.00 Students - \$15.00

Call 908-232-9400

THE THEATER PROJECT
Union County College's Resident Theater Company

\$4.00 off
Any full price ticket with this ad Fri. thru Sun.

ALL in the TIMING

May 2ND THRU 19TH

Thursday thru Saturday at 8pm, Sunday at 3pm

Tickets \$7 on Thursday and \$14 on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday

1033 Springfield Avenue, Cranford, NJ
908-659-5189