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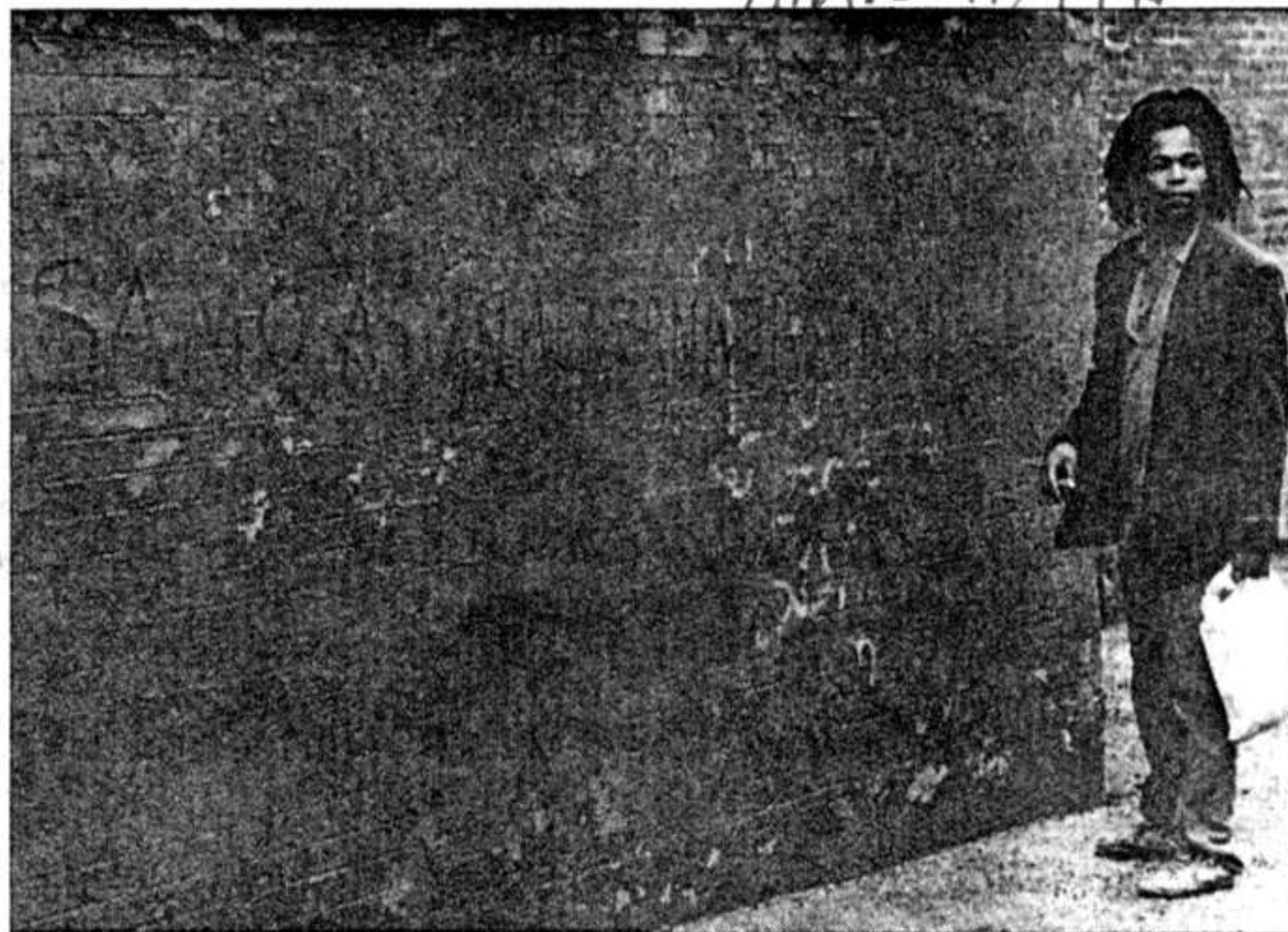
BASQUIAT

A Miramax release of a Jon Kilik presentation of a Peter Brant/Joseph Allen production. Produced by Jon Kilik, Randy Ostrow, Joni Sighvatsson. Executive producers, Peter Brant, Joseph Allen, Michio Yoshizaki. Co-producer, Lech Majewski.

Directed, written by Julian Schnabel, based on a story by Lech Majewski, developed by Michael Thomas Holman. Camera (DuArt color), Ron Fortunato; editor, Michael Berenbaum; music, John Cale; production design, Dan Leigh; art direction, C.J. Simpson; set decoration, Susan Bode; costume design, John Dunn; sound (Dolby), Allan Byer; assistant director, Jonathan Starch; casting, Sheila Jaffe, Georgianne Walken. Reviewed at Sony Studios screening room, L.A., July 10, 1996. (In Venice Film Festival — competing.) MPAA Rating: R. Runningtime: 108 MIN.

Jean Michel Basquiat ... Jeffrey Wright
Rene Ricard Michael Wincott
Benny Dalmau Benicio Del Toro
Gina Cardinale Claire Forlani
Andy Warhol David Bowie
Bruno Bischofberger Dennis Hopper
Albert Milo Gary Oldman
The Interviewer Christopher Walken
The Electrician Willem Dafoe
Mary Boone Parker Posey
Annina Nosei Elina Lowensohn
Henry Geldzahler Paul Bartel
Cynthia Kruger Tatum O'Neal
Tom Kruger Chuck Pfeiffer
Big Pink Courtney Love

The second movie this year to feature Andy Warhol and the New York art scene as a backdrop, albeit in a different decade, "Basquiat" is a decently modest, though decidedly unexciting, attempt to illuminate the short, tumultuous life of Jean Michel Basquiat, the noted black artist who died in 1988 of a heroin overdose. Whatever is wrong with the conceptual framework and execution of Julian Schnabel's feature debut is almost compensated for by an illustrious cast of terrific actors that includes Benicio Del Toro, Christopher Walken, Dennis Hopper and, probably best of all, David Bowie in a brilliant Warhol impersonation. Mixed critical reaction won't much help a film that has limited crossover appeal, but, with aggressive marketing, Miramax might draw the arthouse/indie crowd that embraced "I Shot Andy Warhol" earlier this summer.



DOWNTOWN DARLING: Jeffrey Wright topline "Basquiat" as the East Village graffiti artist who became a celebrated painter.

As writer and director, Schnabel should be commended for avoiding Hollywood's biopic clichés about artists, as Basquiat's meteoric rise to fame and tragic death at the age of 27 would have fit perfectly the timeworn formula. At the same time, he has not come up with a dramatic scheme that would effectively capture the life of an eccentric artist whom the N.Y. Times once described as "the art world's closest equivalent to James Dean." "Basquiat" feels more like observations on the tragic life of a painter than a fully realized narrative with a strong emotional center.

"Nobody wants to be part of a generation that ignores another Van Gogh," says poet Rene Ricard (Michael Wincott) early on, setting the tone for an exploration of a paradox: a celebrated American the general public has never heard of. Story begins in 1981, with the 19-year-old Basquiat (Jeffrey Wright), then named Samo, an angry East Village graffiti artist, drawn into the alluring subculture of drugs.

In broad strokes, tale paints him as a bohemian who detests bourgeois, middle-class society — he sleeps on a cardboard box in a backyard until rain forces him to beg his

friend Benny (Benicio Del Toro) for shelter. Not much family background is provided, though it's clear that he's tormented by a mentally ill mother who's in a convent.

An art world insider himself, Schnabel aims to elucidate the inherent conflict between a misunderstood, rebellious genius and his surrounding crass society. But he seems reluctant to take a definite view of his subject — it's never clear whether Basquiat was a victim of his self-destructive personality or of his exploitative, materialistic milieu. He certainly enjoyed being courted by dealers and collectors, and the rewards that went along with notoriety — there's a lovely scene in which he buys \$3,000 worth of caviar and then asks Warhol to pick up the bill.

It's also hard to understand why "everyone who met him was immediately drawn into his orbit," as one character says. This shortcoming is a combined result of the portrait as crafted by Schnabel, but also of the nonassertive performance by Wright, a gifted stage actor who, despite some touching moments, is not entirely compelling. Schnabel also fails to illuminate the broader context, the fast-and-frenzied '80s that made Soho not only a hot art scene, but also a chic neighborhood for New York scenesters.

On the plus side, "Basquiat" doesn't have the static visual quality of "Search and Destroy," also made by a painter, though Schnabel's film is just as fragmented as David Salle's 1995 movie and just as rambling in finding the right tone to tell its potentially fascinating story.

Still, despite an overly episodic structure, the movie has its share of splendid moments, particularly those depicting Basquiat's interactions with Warhol and with his buddy Benny, friendships that somehow help fathom his psyche as an artist and a man. But the film also contains many maladroitness moments that drag it down, like the on-and-off romance with Gina (Claire Forlani), a waitress Basquiat meets in a coffee shop.

Drama is at its liveliest and most entertaining in those vignettes featuring the artist's eccentric peers and associates, including Dennis Hopper as international art dealer Bruno Bischofberger, Gary Oldman as fellow painter Albert Milo, Christopher Walken as the Interviewer, and a dozen thespians whose roles are based on a mixture of real and fictional personalities.

"Basquiat" doesn't have a painterly quality, as could be expected of a movie made by a visual artist; production values are functional without being striking. John Cale's vigorous score propels nicely an overly episodic narrative, evocatively enhancing its various moods.

As with "The Player," "Mrs. Parker and the Vicious Circle" and other "inside" movies, one of the dangers of having such a resplendent cast is that the audience might be distracted by a spotting game ("Here's Paul Bartel, and there's Tatum O'Neal"). Not in this case: Singly and collectively, high-spirited actors make the film far less dreary and downbeat than it would have been without them.

—Emanuel Levy