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ALBINO ALLIGATOR

A Miramax release (in U.S.) of a UGC D.A. Intl. presentation, in association with Motion Picture Corp. of America., of a Brad Krevoy/Steve Stabler production. (International sales: UGC D.A. Intl., Neuilly, France.) Produced by Brad Krevoy, Steve Stabler, Brad Jenkel.

Directed by Kevin Spacey. Screenplay, Christian Forte. Camera (color, widescreen), Mark Plummer; editor, Jay Cassidy; music, Michael Brook; production design, Nelson Coates; art direction, Burton Rencher; set decoration, Linda Sutton; costume design, Isis Mussenden; sound (Dolby digital), Mark Weingarten; assistant director, John Rusk; casting, David Rubin. Reviewed at Deauville Festival of American Cinema (competing), France, Aug. 31, 1996. (Also in Toronto Film Festival.) Running time: 97 MIN.

Dova Matt Dillon
Janet Faye Dunaway
Milo Gary Sinise
Law William Fichtner
Guy Viggo Mortensen
Jack John Spencer
Danny Skeet Ulrich
Dino M. Emmet Walsh
G.D. Browning Joe Mantegna

Three hapless would-be robbers walk into the wrong bar and don't all walk out again in the character-driven drama "Albino Alligator." Pro cast and muscular lensing aren't quite enough to overcome a script that isn't nearly as ingenious as it would like to seem, but thesp Kevin Spacey makes an honorable and intelligent helming debut with less-than-dazzling material. Box office prospects look fair.

Opening setup, in New Orleans, intercuts two unrelated crimes-in-progress: an ATF stake-out on a lone suspect who gets suspicious and takes flight in a car, and a nearby botched heist involving three men in another getaway car. Second vehicle contains taciturn sociopath Law (William Fichtner) at the wheel and two passengers with shared history: calm, brainy Milo (Gary Sinise) and flustered gang leader Dova (Matt Dillon). In a rapid series of nighttime shots involving the two autos, a federal agent is run over and a car crashes.

Shortly past 4 a.m., the trio — with Milo seriously injured in the crash — stumbles into Dino's Last Chance Bar, a speakeasy-vintage watering hole below street level with no windows and no back door. This pit stop to clean up Milo quickly becomes a trap when ATF agents and police sharpshooters, led by G.D. Browning (Joe Mantegna), surround the building.

Lion's share of pic unfolds in the handsomely appointed bar, tended by crusty owner Dino (M. Emmet Walsh) and gutsy employee Janet (Faye Dunaway). Their three customers are a French-accented man in a suit (Viggo Mortensen), a middle-aged regular (John Spencer) and a quiet young man playing pool (Skeet Ulrich). Although Dova & Co. assume the armed welcoming committee is for them, the Feds are actually after another occupant of the bar. When that information filters in via the TV, the taut social dynamics between captors and hostages change. A late-arriving ultimatum puts personal allegiances and survival instincts on the line.

Pic sustains the claustrophobic feel of a long night in tense quarters, although shots of a clock detract from rather than reinforce the impression of elapsed time. While a keen sense of spatial geography emerges via thoughtful attention to blocking and camera moves, pic often feels like a stage play.

Performances are energetic and, for the most part, convincing, although Mantegna starts out at a very high pitch and Dunaway's somewhat showy New Orleans accent comes and goes. Dillon holds the screen despite some unlikely dialogue, and Fichtner exudes hardened menace.

First script by 25-year-old Christian Forte (son of pop idol Fabian) incorporates a few clever bits — including a hide-in-plain-sight escape proposal and a delectably perverse police statement to a roving reporter — but mostly reworks the hostage-countdown genre to merely serviceable effect.

Title, inspired by the apparent tendency of alligators to sacrifice albino runts in order to trick rival 'gators and appropriate their territory, refers to a pool-shooting tactic in which a player deliberately blows a shot, the better to vanquish an opponent. Sometimes jazzy, sometimes ominous score reinforces pressure-cooker mood. —Lisa Nesselson