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**James Woods, left, Melanie Griffith, Natasha Gregson Wagner and Vincent Kartheiser are living on the edge in "Another Day in Paradise."**

## Another Day in Paradise

(Drama)

opened 1/22/99  
SF

A Trimark Pictures release of a Chinese Bookie Pictures production. (International sales: KMI, Los Angeles.) Produced by Stephen Chin, Larry Clark, James Woods. Co-producer, Scott Shiffman.

Directed by Larry Clark. Screenplay, Christopher Landon, Stephen Chin, based on the book by Eddie Little. Camera (CFI color), Eric Edwards; editor, Luis Colina; production designer, Aaron Osborne; art director, Erin Cochran; costume designer, Kathryn Morrison; sound (Dolby SR), Arthur Rochester; assistant director, Louis Milito; casting, John Papsidera. **Reviewed at Venice Film Festival (Nights and Stars), Sept. 11, 1998. (Also in Toronto Film Festival — Special Presentation.)** Running time: 100 MIN.

Mel ..... James Woods  
Sid ..... Melanie Griffith  
Bobbie ..... Vincent Kartheiser  
Rosie ..... Natasha Gregson Wagner  
Reverend ..... James Otis  
With: Paul Hipp, Brent Briscoe, Peter Sarsgaard, Kim Flowers, Branden Williams.

### By DAVID ROONEY

**P**hotographer-turned-filmmaker Larry Clark's seminal photo essay on Midwestern drug and street subculture of the 1960s and early '70s, "Tulsa," was an acknowledged influence for such films as "Taxi Driver" and "Drugstore Cowboy." The director now reclaims the inspiration in his second feature, "Another Day in Paradise," which resembles "Drugstore Cowboy" in its human take on a surrogate family glued together by drugs and

**Reviews of "Besieged," "Clay Pigeons," "Dog Park," "2 Seconds" and "Living Out Loud" on pages 40 and 41**

crime. More conventional and arguably more satisfying than Clark's provocative debut, "Kids," this imperfect but compelling outlaw drama may be too raw and unflinching to make a wide splash, but should find an audience ready to respond to its gritty aesthetic.

In launching this seemingly downbeat but surprisingly warm slice of life on the edge, U.S. distrib Trimark's major asset is an emotionally engaging performance full of heart from Melanie Griffith in an uncharacteristic, deglamorized role. The film also features a significant discovery in Vincent Kartheiser, seen previously only in children's films ("An Indian in the Cupboard," "Alaska").

Clark has said his aim here was to take a Hollywood genre and make it real. He largely achieves this by refusing to cut away or sensationalize the harsh reality being portrayed. Where the film does

stumble marginally is in some of its climactic violence, which could have been better handled, but its finely pitched tone and generous, nonjudgmental treatment of characters ultimately make it work.

More so than "Kids," which depicted doomed New York City teenagers and was shaped as much by Harmony Korine's screenplay as by Clark, this more traditional narrative feature seems to spring directly from Clark's Midwestern background and his acknowledged experience of renegade life.

Arresting opening has teenage junkie Bobbie (Kartheiser) breaking into a community college to empty its vending machines of cash and being pulped by a security guard, whom he eventually subdues with a knife. Staggering home to the slummy apartment he shares with his g.f., Rosie (Natasha Gregson Warner), and friend Danny (Branden Williams), he shoots some heroin to dull the pain, and his injuries are treated by Danny's slick, drug-dealing uncle, Mel (James Woods).

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After nursing him back to health, Mel recruits Bobbie to help steal a major haul of speed from an out-of-town doctor's clinic. Bobbie and Rosie hit the road with Mel and his tough but maternal sidekick, Sid (Griffith), who broaden the waifs' horizons, giving them their first taste of good living. The robbery comes off smoothly, but the subsequent resale of the drugs to some hotheaded rednecks goes awry, forcing Sid to step in with a shotgun.

With both Mel and Bobbie seriously wounded, they head to the secluded h.q. of evangelical gun merchant the Reverend (James Otis, somewhat over the top) for treatment. The close call changes things for Bobbie, and, after losing the baby she was carrying, Rosie succumbs to depression, becoming more reckless in her drug use. When Mel recovers sufficiently to start planning another scam, the family unit already has begun to come undone.

Set in unidentified Midwestern towns and in a period that appears to be the 1970s but also is unspecified, the film builds an atmosphere of quiet desperation and dread that contrasts interestingly with its affecting portrait of perhaps the ultimate screwed-up American family.

A good part of the credit for how effectively the group's instant bonds are established goes to Griffith. The actress may look a little strappingly healthy to be a heroin addict, but she brings naturalness and a melancholy sweetness to the role of the aging wild child whose unfulfilled desire for children finds an outlet in the two strays brought along by her charismatic lover. The character's protective instincts, even at the cost of her relationship with Mel, make for a poignant conclusion.

Woods gives Mel plenty of nervous energy and dangerous dynamism, but the actor — who also produced — appears to have been given free rein a little too often, resulting in a few too many showy, explosive moments that jar with the other actors' more restrained honesty. Gregson Wagner registers sympathetically in the most tragic role, while Kartheiser proves a magnetic presence, giving Bobbie a skanky, heroin-chic sexiness. He easily conveys the inarticulate yearning the kid feels for the kind of family warmth and support he has never had.

The grainy textures of lenser Eric Edwards' often crude images and his limber, edgy camerawork are a snug fit for the material. Also enhancing the mood is the ample use of bluesy soul songs by artists such as Otis Redding, Bobby Womack, Allen Toussaint and Clarence Carter, who appears in the film as a nightclub singer.