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Coppola Revisits Gangland and Music Halls in *Cotton Club*

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By MICHAEL LAM

There is no denying that *The Cotton Club*, though flawed and challengingly compact, is the best film Francis Coppola has directed since the monumental *Godfather*. The elements with which he experimented in three more recent failures are once again presented, and they succeed marvelously here. The underworld populated by gangsters, which *The Godfather* has made into a familiar sight with moviegoers, is used as the background once more. Coppola is clearly in the territory he feels most comfortable with, and he proves that he is still the master of this particular genre.

Most of the film takes place in or around the famous jazz club in Harlem where famous musicians played and notorious mobsters gathered in the late 20s. Some of the characters—most notably the ones played by Richard Gere and Lonette McKee—are apparently based on real people, and many well-known personalities make cameo appearances: Gloria Swanson, James Cagney, Charlie Chaplin, just to name a few. If nothing else, it is a wonderfully fun and exciting roller coaster ride.

OVER-PRODUCED

And it is definitely more than just an entertaining journey through the eye-opening gangland. *The Cotton Club* is executed with first rate craftsmanship on all technical levels—the photography by Stephen Goldblatt, the production design by Richard Sylbert and the costumes by Milena Canonero are breathtaking. This is an all-around over-produced film. Everything is meticulously and painstakingly done to death. The overall result represents the collaboration of some of the most talented people working in film today. One does not necessarily love the finished product, but the skills of the individuals are surely admirable.

Not unlike *One from the Heart*, *the Outsiders*, and *Rumble Fish*, the weakest element of *The Cotton Club* is its screenplay. However, though the department is the same, the problem is entirely different. While the other three suffer from pale stories, overblown sentimentality and simple-mindedness, *The Cotton*



Gregory Hines in a scene from *The Cotton Club*.

Club falls victim, if only slightly, to its director's ambition. There are simply too many characters in the two parallel plots to be packed into 130 minutes. Even if the missing links of the stories are excusable, the unfinished dance sequences are not. They are staged excellently, and there is certainly not enough of them.

The exhilarating last sequence, so brilliantly blending real life activities and stage happenings together, is a masterly stroke. Maybe it does not make up for the inadequacies of the script, but at least it makes the shortcomings seem less severe. Evidently this is how *One from the Heart* should have been: life portrayed as a soundstage

where everything falls into its proper place neatly and, preferably, to the best of appropriate music.

The Cotton Club opens Friday at the Regency III.

