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Dark Days

Albino Alligator
Directed by Kevin Spacey
Written by Christian Forte
A Miramax release

Inside
Directed by Arthur Penn
Written by Bima Stagg
A Strand release

2 x 50 Years of French Cinema
Directed by Anne-Marie Mieville and Jean-Luc Godard
Produced by the BFI
At Anthology Film Archives
Saturdays and Sundays at 4 p.m.
Through February 16

BY AMY TAUBIN

Anyone who's had even a fleeting thought about film release patterns knows that January is the pits. Presuming that viewers are sated after an orgy of holiday moviegoing, distributors dump their surefire losers into the first available theaters. Thus we have *Albino Alligator*, Kevin Spacey's directorial debut, oozing out of Miramax's storeroom, and *Inside*, Arthur Penn's made-for-cable chamber piece, pushed, inappropriately, onto the big screen by Strand.

In *Albino Alligator*, Matt Dillon, Gary Sinise, and William Fichtner play a trio of low-level burglars who take

Africa's version of the Nuremberg Trials—but leaves one hungry for something more factual and analytical.

Which, of course, brings us to Jean-Luc Godard and his ongoing video meditations on cinema, particularly the recent *2 x 50 Years of French Cinema*. Two gray-haired men are seated in the breakfast room of a lakeside French hotel. One orders weak coffee; the other, muttering something about the excessive prices, demands a glass of water. The grizzled water-drinker is the director Jean-Luc Godard; his more dapper companion is the actor Michel Piccoli who, in this year of 1995, is also "the President of the 100th Anniversary of Cinema Association." Godard explains to Piccoli (one of the stars of his film *Contempt*) that he and his partner (Anne-Marie Mieville) are also involved in this 100th anniversary business. They've been asked by the British Film Institute to make a film about French cinema as part of a series on various national cinemas.

There's nothing wrong with people paying to go to the movies, but if that's what's being celebrated, why not say so?

Furthermore, he doubts that this kind of theme-park celebration will do anything to keep alive the history of the cinema of which he and Piccoli have been a part—no more than the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the liberation of Paris or of the Warsaw ghetto uprising keeps that history alive. (The coincidence of these anniversaries accounts for the title *2 x 50 Years*.) So he sends Piccoli off to question the hotel staff: "Do you know Jacques Becker?" Piccoli inquires of a young sous-chef. "You mean Boris Becker," the chef replies contemptuously.

Of course, *2 x 50 Years* is not simply a polemic. A grace note to Godard's dense *L'Histoire du Cinéma* series, it's also a memento mori, a time capsule, and a wildly romantic struggle against mortality and loss (that struggle being the core of cinema itself). "Cinema is mortal and it's normal that it should stop," says Godard, wrenchingly aware that the art in which he invested his immortality probably won't outlive him.

Like the journalist he once was, Godard finds an angle for his piece—one that, as he admits, would take more than 50 minutes to prove, but that nevertheless gets him through it. Claiming that French cinema has been distinguished from beginning to end by its critical edge, he weaves text and images to trace the vision of this "other cinema" from Diderot and Baudelaire (whose writing virtually called it into existence) through his own *Cahiers du Cinéma* colleagues and the generation that followed them. (It's slim pickings when he gets past the '60s.) In the end, the vision is incorporated into his own. It's a way of combining pictures, words, and music so that one is both moved by them and impelled to reflect on what moves one and why. And though compared to other recent Godard films *2 x 50 Years of Cinema* is no more than a sleight of hand, it's nevertheless the first (and maybe the last) best film of the year. ♦



Called to the bar: Faye Dunaway in *Albino Alligator*

refuge in a neighborhood bar after they blunder into an FBI stakeout and accidentally run down some agents. Surrounded by the cops, they hold the bar's occupants as hostages while they play for time.

A half-baked mélange of *The Desperate Hours* and all those Tennessee Williams plays that hinge on reptilian metaphors (*Night of the Iguana*, *The Fugitive Kind*), *Albino Alligator* is as pretentious as it is bloody, though sadly lacking in brains. Working in close quarters, Spacey soups up the inaction with lots of camera movement and an ominous musical score that, I suppose, is meant to suggest the inner turmoil of the stock characters cluttering the screen.

As an actor, Spacey has made anonymity his identity (no mean feat even when it verges on shtick). As a director, however, he's no more than the latest, not very stylish member of a filmmaking boys' club that ran out of energy long before he applied. *Albino Alligator* takes itself too seriously to work as genre; on the other hand, its devices are too shopworn to allow for a personal or original point of view.

With the exception of the resourceful Sinise (most alive here when he's quietly bleeding to death) and the charismatic newcomer Skeet Ulrich, the actors (including Faye Dunaway as a high-strung bartender) seem to be

laboring under the delusion that *Albino Alligator* will transform their careers. And the larger their talent, the more embarrassing it is to watch them work so hard to no avail. At one point Dillon's character has a heart-to-heart with himself in the mirror. "I should have settled down and gotten married," he mutters. What's evoked is not another possible world but merely the opposite, though no less clichéd, strain of Amerindie. Dear Matt, just because *Albino Alligator* turned into a rout doesn't mean you have to get all warm and fuzzy the next time around.

Arthur Penn takes on the past 10 years of South African history in a film that is both well-meaning and well-made, but which mostly makes one aware of the inadequacy of conventional film fiction. Eric Stolz plays an intellectual accused in 1988 of conspiring to overthrow the apartheid regime. Nigel Hawthorne plays the army officer who tortures him to death. Nearly a decade later, the colonel is himself the object of an investigation and his interrogator is a former revolutionary (Louis Gossett Jr.) who witnessed the torture from his own prison cell. Segueing back and forth in time, the film makes an emotionally compelling case for the "The Truth Commission"—South

The consummate ironist, Godard adds that he was not the BFI's first choice. "They wanted Tavernier, but he was too busy . . ."

As one would expect, Godard has quarrels with the whole way the 100th anniversary is being handled, and he uses Piccoli as a patsy to lay them out. "We didn't want just to make a compilation of clips," he says, "but rather something more polemical." Godard argues that what is being celebrated is not cinema as an art ("dreams projected on a screen") but its commercial-



A contender: Jean-Luc Godard's *2 x 50 Years of Cinema*