

Nicolas Cage film is melancholy comedy

By Oliver Spivey
Staff Writer

There are not many actors who can express modern alienation better than Nicolas Cage. Cage is at his best when playing disaffected, high-strung loners lost in the vacuum of a society where everything is cut-rate and disposable—even individual human dignity. Perhaps the only other current American actor who exudes modern desperation so well—though in a much more subdued way—is Bill Murray *Lost in Translation* (2003), *Broken Flowers* (2005).

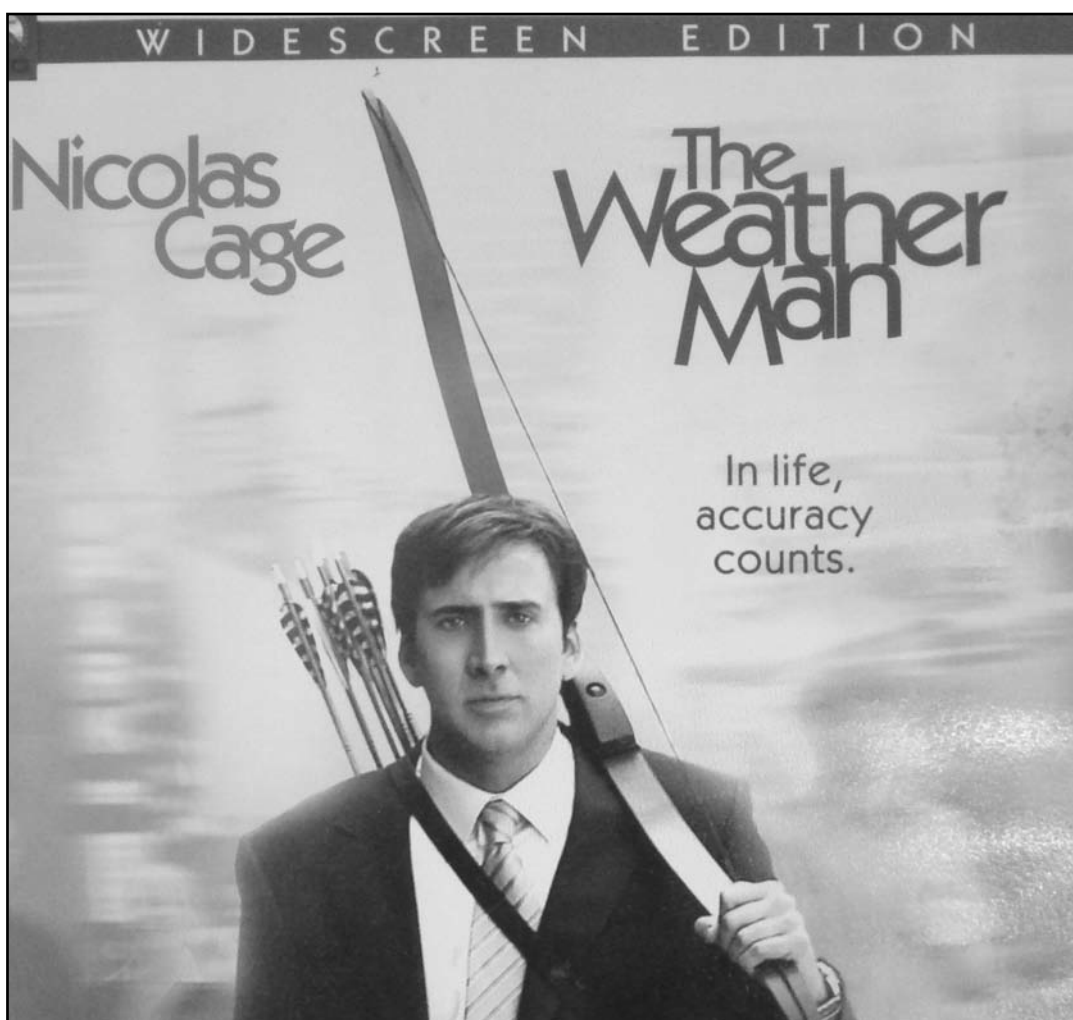
Give Cage a great director, a literate script, and plenty of existential angst to work with and the results are phenomenal, rendering modern classics like *Bringing Out the Dead* (1999), *Adaptation* (2002) and *Matchstick Men* (2003). Alas, put Cage in a mammoth-budgeted, special effects-bloated action picture—*National Treasure* (2004), *Ghost Rider* (2007), *Bangkok Dangerous* (2008)—and the many fascinating characters he has waiting within wither to mere outlines of human beings, who apparently exist only to pull triggers and overcome the laws of gravity.

In Gore Verbinski's *The Weather Man*, Cage plays David Spritz, a jaded Chicago weather-

man whose life is in shambles. His longtime wife (Hope Davis) has divorced him, his overweight daughter (Gemmenne de la Pena) is depressed and smokes, his son (Nicholas Hoult) hangs out with a pedophilic counselor and his Pulitzer prize-winning father (the great Michael Caine) always chides his lack of ambition with the kindest tone of voice possible.

The people who watch Spritz's forecasts on television despise him and recognizing his insecurities, they sense an easy target. When they see him on the street, they throw fast food and half-finished milkshakes at him from passing cars; like the fast food, the service he provides is cheap and fast, but never sustaining. He soon extends the metaphor of fast food to his life in general. Spritz is one of those guys that can't seem to get anything right, no matter the amount of effort he puts in.

From his ineffectiveness stems the film's often-heartbreaking humor. The humor in *The Weather Man* comes across as entirely sincere and without contrivance, arising organically from the film's all-too-familiar situations. I think we laugh at what Spritz is going through because we've all been there.



Notice one scene that occurs when Spritz thinks back on events that led to his divorce. His wife sends him out to pickup seafood for the family, demanding that he not forget the tartar sauce.

As he walks along the city sidewalks towards the restaurant, we hear an internal stream-of-consciousness monologue. Along with repeating "tartar sauce" over and over in his mind, his nervous and random thoughts also comment on everything from the attractive woman in front of him to Neil

Young to a man in a balloon. By the time he makes it back home with the food Spritz has, of course, forgotten the tartar sauce.

The scene is hilarious precisely because so many of us have been in the same situation, where our thoughts are occupied and we forget that one extra thing that someone has specifically stressed we not forget. However, the scene is also spot-on in observing how, in life, it is often the little things that we do or do not do and those minute flaws

and cracks in our personalities that can strain our most intimate relationships.

Another touching little moment of insight comes when Spritz and his daughter take archery lessons. They both begin learning to shoot arrows with great accuracy, giving them something new and productive to focus on in their lives. Even if the symbolism of it all is a bit heavy-handed, Verbinski handles the rebuilding of father-daughter relations with subtle warmth and humor.

When Spritz finds out his father is dying, the two finally have that son talk that has never come about. Caine delivers the best line in the movie, giving his troubled son the ultimate advice about what to do with the excess baggage we all carry with us in the harsh game of life—a game we must all eventually lose.

The Weather Man was a critical and commercial flop when released in the fall of 2005. Critics, with a few brave exceptions, wiped the floor with the movie. At the theater where I've worked as a projectionist since 2004, people left the movie shaking their heads in disapproval. Many left the theater saying, "It was just too depressing." I'm still not quite sure what that means. Must we only have mindless fluff and vapid escapism to "enjoy" a movie?

What's amazing to me is that the director of this unheralded gem, Verbinski, is the man who brought us uninspired blockbusters like *The Ring* (2002) and the *Pirates of the Caribbean* trilogy.

Hopefully, he can use some of the money from those mind-numbing CGI assaults and create more movies like this uncommonly thoughtful human comedy.

Lancaster and Jones win Oscars for work

By Oliver Spivey
Staff Writer

With our editor Wade Allen attending Shirley Jones' "A Night at the Oscars" at RCC in Hamlet, I thought it would be entirely fitting to take a look at the film for which she won the Oscar for Best Supporting Actress.

Instead of reviewing those popular favorites that showcase her more wholesome, good girl image—things like *Oklahoma!* (1955), *The Music Man* (1962), and *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* (1963)—I chose to take a look at director Richard Brooks' adaptation of Sinclair Lewis' novel, *Elmer Gantry*, in which Jones plays a sultry prostitute.

Winning the Oscar for Best Actor of 1960, Burt Lancaster plays the boozing traveling salesman, Elmer Gantry. It's a milestone Lancaster performance, with director Brooks getting the most out of Burt's signature grin through his many close-up shots.

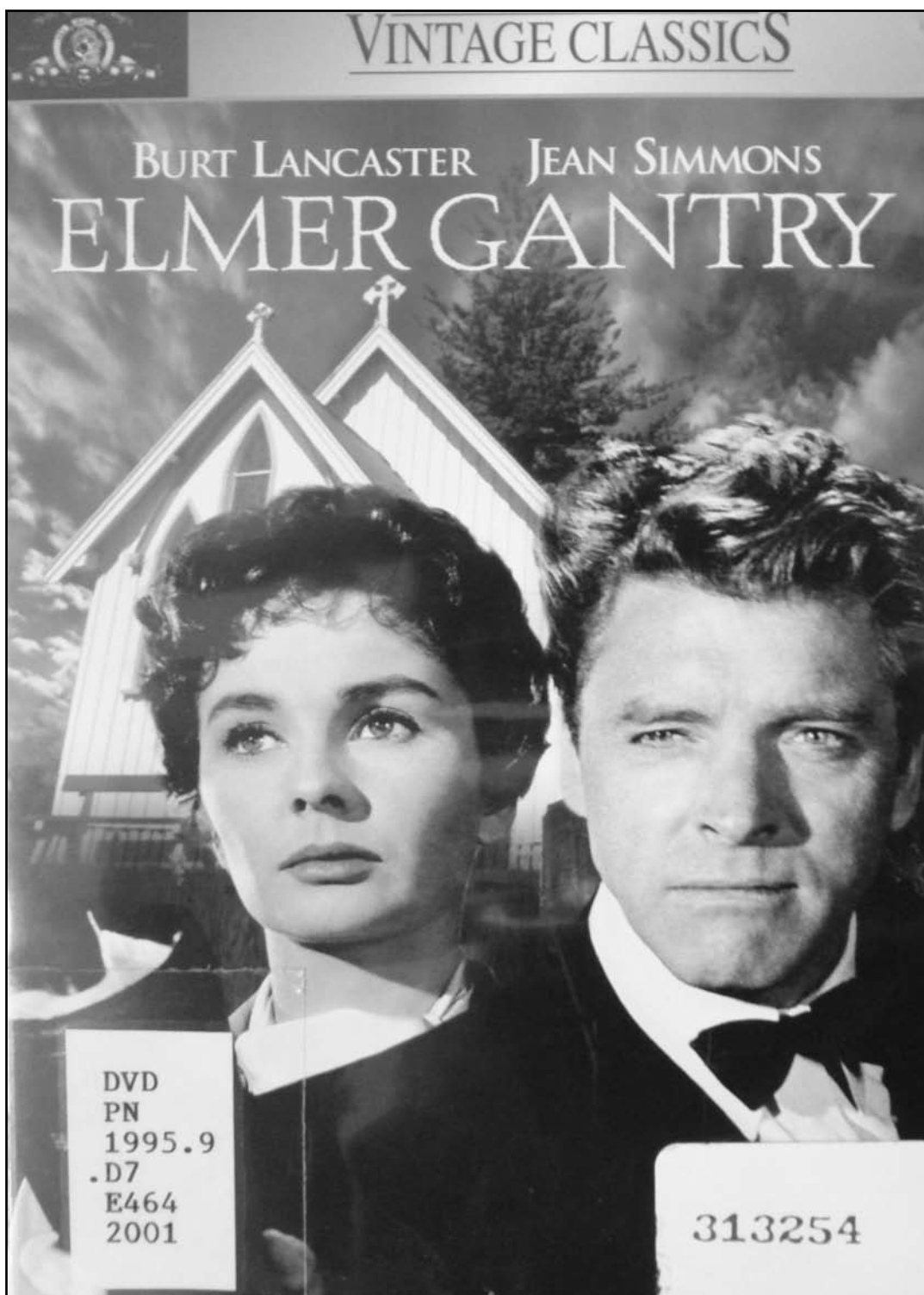
Elmer Gantry, an indictment of both capitalism and Christianity in America, is able to go just about as far as any 1960 movie could possibly hope in condemning the two pillars of American conservatism. Rather than treat them as two separate institutions, the movie shows how religion itself becomes a commodity, often corrupted by the free market ideologues who proclaim to be the most religious members of society.

The story takes place during the Prohibition years. The film opens with a sequence in a barroom where the drunken Gantry tells dirty jokes, runs a quick scam and sleeps with a prostitute. In just these few minutes of screen time, we seem to know everything we need to know about Mr. Gantry. With a knack for oration and an electric presence, Gantry soon realizes he could make it big in the world of revivalist preaching. He decides to put his talent to use by joining Sister Sharon Falconer (Jean Simmons) and her revival group. Gantry understands that lonely and scared yokels will do anything to know God loves them—even hand out their hard-earned money.

Charming his way into Falconer's circle, Gantry soon becomes a sensation at revival meetings, setting small towns abuzz with talk of his fiery preaching. Keeping all the delusion and mass hysteria in check is the atheist reporter Jim Lefferts (Arthur Kennedy), whose cynical pen has been critiquing Gantry and Falconer the whole time.

There's the lure of money, but the pseudo-righteous Gantry has another major weakness—women. It becomes very clear that his interest in Falconer is not just economic, but carnal in nature.

The proposal to have a massive revival in the Mid-Western city of Zenith is handled like a



business deal, with all the big capitalists trying to figure out how to sell the event. Gantry is able to use his charisma to keep funding flowing in, while maintaining the appearance of moral crusader by raiding speakeasies and whorehouses with the police and press by his side.

But Lefferts soon runs a scathing story denouncing the revivalists as hypocritical frauds, almost ruining their image. Adding to the fire is Lulu Bains (Jones), a prostitute whose heart was crushed by the womanizing Gantry long ago, who is hired to blackmail the revivalists with some

naughty photos. Jones plays against her screen image wonderfully and gets the most risqué lines in the movie.

During the film's final scene, some think that they have witnessed a miracle of God, but one careless act by a person meaning no harm causes bad things to happen to

good people (I won't tell you more details than that). In the end, Brook's film raises a lot of questions about the existence of God and the rationale for religion in our lives.

Some critics have never liked Lancaster's athletic and macho performances, finding them ham-fisted and annoying. But his screen persona is in perfect sync with the boisterous and bawdy traits of Gantry. Lancaster's serious roles in intense dramas like *Come Back, Little Sheba* (1952) and *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957) set him on the path to a handful of great performances the following decade. Besides his role in *Elmer Gantry*, Lancaster lit up the screen with performances in *Birdman of Alcatraz* (1962), *The Leopard* (1963) and the sadly overlooked *The Swimmer* (1968).

Film critic Andrew Sarris found writer/director Brooks to be "excessively rhetorical," giving us films in which he says what he means instead of showing us what he feels. It does seem true that he was not always the most visually expressive of directors, but his handling of classics like *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958), *The Professionals* (1966) and this film is enough to convince me of his considerable strengths behind the camera. Now, convince yourself—watch *Elmer Gantry*.

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