

Broadway Damage

Directed by Victor Mignatti

Uneven but amiable, Victor Mignatti's debut *Broadway Damage* is at once a meditation on the dream/reality chasm, a satire festooned with piquant repartee, a feel-good dramedy that blindly pursues its romanticism, and a facile morality play where the good guy wins the prince. The roommate setup—a rakish, blond Creek god (Michael Shawn Lucas) who wants a "perfect 10" lover; a bespectacled gay nerd (Aaron Williams) who, head over heels for the former, defines the phrase *unrequited love*; an overweight, overaccessorized struggling writer (Mara Hobel) whose phone calls Tina Brown won't return—promises a certain amount of nefarious humor as the three engage in a series of madcap quests for the perfect career and love affair. The film vacillates between two incongruous modes: at its sardonic best, the riffs on "the hierarchy of beauty" and "the bad-boy myth" are Solondz-worthy; at its sentimental worst, the shameless banality can be hokier than Meg Ryan's smirk. The zany pursuit of ideals escalates to the finale, where an improbable happy ending is tagged on. Always bittersweet, sometimes trenchant, and often hackneyed, it's a gem tarnished by its forced finish.

—ANDREW HUANG

Gaach

Directed by Catherine Berge
At the Asia Society, May 27-29

Soumitra Chatterjee remembers the empathy of mourners at Satyajit Ray's funeral: "Sit by his body instead of walking," some fans urged. "You were his spiritual son." *Gaach*, a revealing new documentary, looks back on Chatterjee's 30-year acting career in Bengali film and theater, focusing on his collaboration with Ray, for whom he was protégé, mouthpiece, and muse. Ray cast the actor in 14 films and made him a star. In his youth, Chatterjee had a flair for evoking restlessness, mischief, and fresh-faced optimism; girls swooned.

Director Catherine Berge occasionally stages hokey scenes, but her interviews uncover some seminal and idiosyncratic moments. When he grew a mustache for a role, Chatterjee decided, "The mustache is there to stay; therefore, the mustache must act." For Ray's *The Lonely Wife*, he had to change his handwriting to a "pre-Tagorean" script. Also an acclaimed poet and playwright, Chatterjee still looks at his work as a daunting struggle. "After so many years of hunting, when I go into the jungle I feel afraid, just like anyone else," he says in the film. "But after so many years of practice I can send the bullet to the right spot."

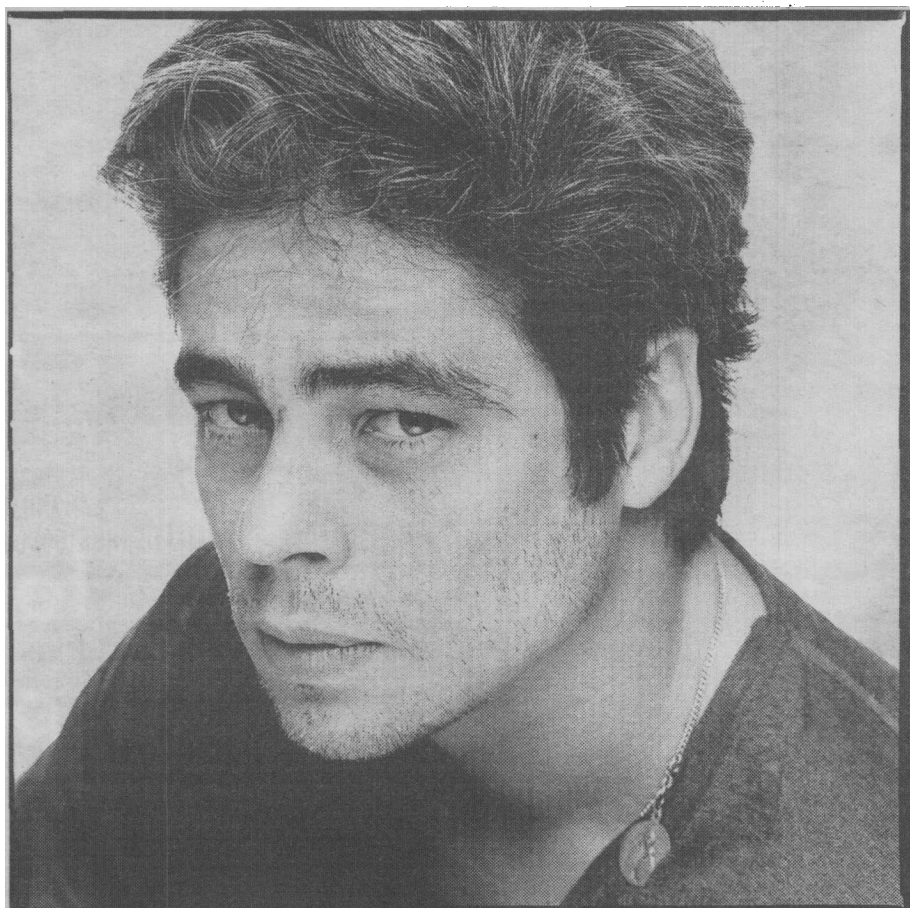
—SALMA ABDELNOUR

Viva Las Vegas

Benicio Del Toro Defends the Gonzo Golden Rules

BY ED MORALES

Cannes is like Las Vegas," smirks Benicio Del Toro. "The first day you win, the second day you lose, and the third day they run you out of town." Del Toro, who plays



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The Fan, and *Basquiat* are studies in coiled intensity. But to play the deranged Dr. Gonzo (based on Hunter Thompson's right-hand man, Oscar "Zeta" Acosta), he gained 48 pounds in nine weeks, eating "chairs, tables, buildings, and bridges. But what really tipped the balance was doughnuts."

Born and raised in Santurce, Puerto Rico—a suburb of San Juan that "likes to think of itself as the Manhattan of the Caribbean"—the strapping Del Toro, 31, is the son of a country lawyer who shipped him to boarding school in Pennsylvania when he got into teenage trouble. He then went to UC San Diego, where he split his time between painting and acting classes.

Like Acosta, who in real life was a Chicano activist lawyer, Del Toro feels ambivalent about his Latin identity. "He was stuck between two worlds," the actor says. "I can go there in a second." Thompson recognized the wild streak Del Toro shared with Acosta. "We were doing the fantasy sequence where we're in jail and Harry Dean Stanton sentences us to 'castration, double castration!' Hunter comes up to me and says, 'You know what your problem is?' And I said, 'What?' 'Your face!' And I said, 'What's the matter with my face?' And he said, 'No matter what you do, you always look guilty!'"

When I ask Del Toro if he knows that Acosta once sued Thompson for

stealing the idea of gonzo journalism, he is philosophical. "Everybody steals from everybody else. I stole the idea for the 'ether walk' from my 16-month-old goddaughter, Isabel."

Del Toro's only foray into Hollywood romantic-lead territory yielded last year's *Excess Baggage*. "I tried it, to see how it felt to do one of those things, and I'm proud of a few scenes in that movie, and the essence of my character, but I suffer too much when I see it." The actor is currently talking to Spike Lee about playing an Italian hairdresser in his next effort, *Summer of Sam*, about the effect that serial killer David Berkowitz had on a Bronx neighborhood in 1977. After that, he hopes to work with his friend Julian Schnabel on his adaptation of Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas' memoir, *Before Night Falls*. "Julian calls me up and says, 'I got this part—it could be you, Banderas, or Al Pacino.' And I said, 'Fuck you, if you want me, you call me and tell me you want me. I don't want to audition against those guys.'"

Visions of Brando-esque eccentricity can pop into your head while watching Del Toro, onscreen and off, but he shies away from such talk when writers bring it up. "I'm always afraid about the comparison to Mr. M.B. He's the Picasso of acting." But he invoked Brando's (and his own) teacher Stella Adler when responding to criticism of *Fear and Loathing* as a pro-drug film. "Stella was telling me how to play a junkie," he remembers. "She was saying he's a man who uses his body as a billboard to tell society that there's something wrong."

"People are going to criticize this film, but all I have to say is 'Fuck 'em.' We just did a classic piece. Read the book. Are we sending a message like 'Do drugs, it's cool'? When you do *Romeo and Juliet*, are you saying that it's okay to fall in love and kill yourself by drinking poison?"

Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas's raving Dr. Gonzo, had just returned from France after the movie's extremely cool reception. Dr. Gonzo's careening swagger in *Fear and Loathing* is perhaps the darkly comic character actor's maniacal

pinnacle; he's grotesquely charming as the bull-in-a-china-shop foil to Johnny Depp's Raoul Duke. Del Toro is the kind of chameleon-like performer who seems to sneak up sideways on the viewer—his roles in *The Usual Suspects*,

tended Juilliard for three years ("It's really a trade school," he says, "not that different from if you were learning automotive engine repair") and dropped out after landing a role opposite Albert Finney in Peter Yates's *The Run of the Country*. Though he's scored a few substantial stage roles, appearing most recently in *Arcadia*, Keeslar's pre-*Last Days* filmography has been unremarkable, to say the least; one can only hope that *The Stupids* and *Mr. Magoo* represent momentary lapses of judgment. "I could sit around and apologize for movies that I've done," he says, "but it would just

sound petty. I've gotten less naive about picking projects."

Promising a surreal counterpoint to buttoned-down Josh, Keeslar next stars as a punk-rock drummer in Gregg Araki's forthcoming



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Splendor, a presumably lurid update of *Design for Living*. "I'm half-naked throughout," he says. "I have bleached blond hair in the film and I wear crushed velvet hip-huggers. Gregg had me wax my chest and wear blue contacts and he put a huge tattoo of a bar code on my arm. The movie opens with me playing drums at this club, in nothing but a loincloth."

Stillman's Stand-In

Matt Keeslar Relives the Disco Years

BY DENNIS LIM

In Whit Stillman's *Last Days of Disco*, the task of articulating the film's "Disco Lives" manifesto falls on the unlikely shoulders of a young, alarmingly earnest Manhattan prosecutor with a history of manic depression. Cannily played by Matt Keeslar, Josh is the movie's disco enthusiast—which, in this case, also makes him the primary mouthpiece for the prolix sociological postulations that, in Stillman's films, stand in for one-liners.

Keeslar says he's grateful that *Last Days* is a Whit Stillman film—with the requisite "intellectual gabbing"—as opposed to a movie about disco per se. "I would not be in the movie if I'd had to dance at the audition," he deadpans. The 25-year-old actor says he barely remembers disco. "When I was a kid, there was a club near my house and spray-painted across the entrance was 'Disco Sucks.' That's the only real contact I had with the era."

Stillman's movies—which some

regard as anthropological—have always had strong autobiographical elements, and the director admits, "Josh's attitude toward disco is my attitude toward disco in a comically overstated way." He adds, "It was the toughest part to cast. Matt's actually much better looking than I'd intended for the character, but I couldn't find a Josh as written in the script—more of a diamond in the rough, with the accent on rough. It's great, though, when you cast off-type and the actor makes the role his own. We both thought about it a lot—about what would seem priggish, and what would seem goofy, and how the character could not be either. Matt was very good at walking that line."

The Michigan-born Keeslar at-