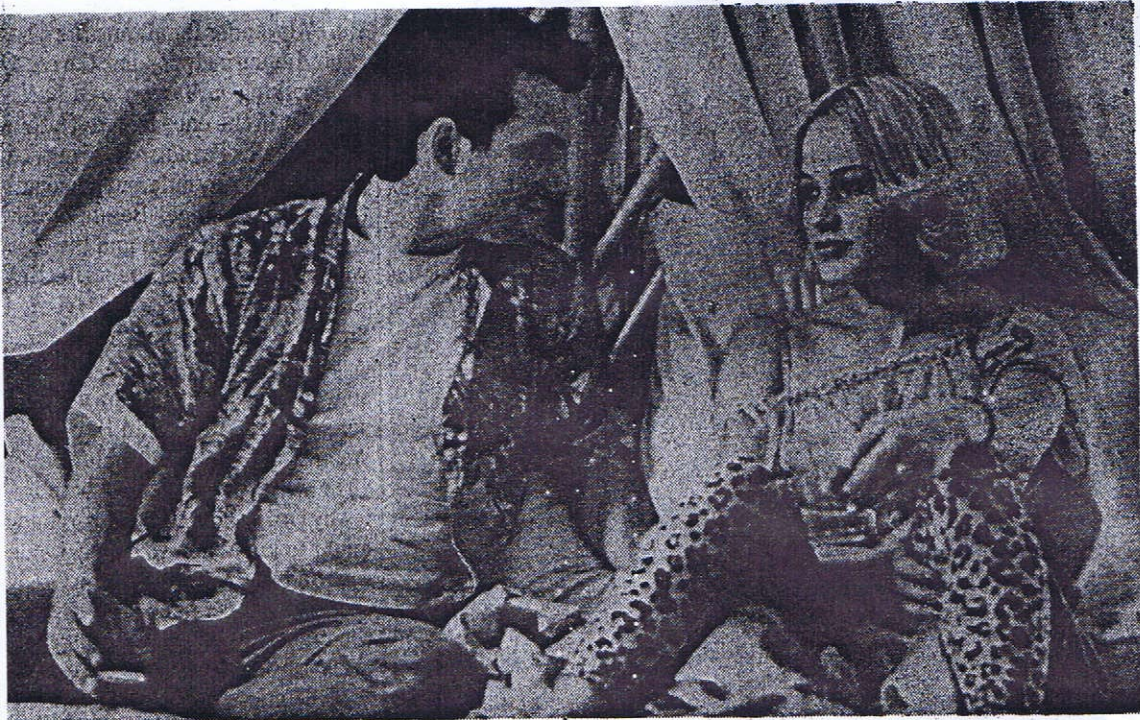


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Christian Slater and Patricia Arquette in *True Romance*, directed by Tony Scott.

Ron Phillips

Kalifornia' and 'True Romance'

They Shoot People, Don't They

BY MARK HALL AMITIN

Film *Kalifornia* and *True Romance* have much in common, most of which having to do with what is profoundly and intrinsically wrong with America's cultural love affair with violence and its callous disregard for human life. There are, in both films however, sterling performances by some of our best actors. What compels actors of merit and note to accept parts in the continuing disintegration of our moral fibre? And what about those responsible for the green-lighting of these projects and the bankrollers who back them?

Truly there is an audience, large or small, for every mode of artistic en-

deavor, and there is little argument that the movie business, being a business, concerns itself first and foremost with profits. There was a time, though, when filmmakers and their financiers seemed to care at least a little about the minds and hearts of their audience. Thrills, chills and fantasy are to be encouraged, but blatant brutality, however dazzlingly executed, is quite another matter.

Kalifornia, starring Brad Pitt, Juliette Lewis, Michelle Forbes and David Duchovny, and directed by Dominic Sena (making his feature film debut here) holds its center and keeps one involved in its unfolding story. It concentrates on the development of character and has a finely fo-

cused story line. In addition, director Sena has a good eye for imagery, although he tends to go a little overboard on effects such as rainstorms. Nonetheless, the performances of all four lead actors are full, compelling and, of course, frightening; each of their characters possessing both glaring flaws and hope for redemption.

As with *True Romance*, we have here a young couple for whom California is a state of mind as well as a new beginning a la Hollywood; unreal, imagined, far removed from the realm of contemporary, tinsel town reality we know and abhor; corruption, decadence and the glorification

of violence.

Brian (David Duchovny) is a writer trying to churn out a book on serial killers. His girlfriend, Carrie (Michelle Forbes), a photographer of arty and sensually steamy work, can't seem to get a grip on a subject, so they go for a cross-country car trip to visit the killing grounds of famous criminals. They put up a notice for travelling companions to share the cost of the journey in their perfectly-kept, forest green, Lincoln convertible. The only response comes from a white-trash twosome in a trailer; Early (Brad Pitt) and his waif-like girlfriend Adele (Juliette Lewis.) Early has a criminal past and a mean spirit. We don't know how bad until we discover he has murdered his landlord and burned down the trailer rather than pay the rent.

The well-heeled, seemingly intelligent Brian and Carrie begin to disintegrate as the trip progresses. Early begins his killing spree in a gas station restroom and continues relentlessly and mercilessly until the end. Brian himself turns killer and there's an epilogue of numbing nonsense which excuses murder by

those who feel remorse as opposed to killers who do so for sport or from mental defect. Nevertheless, the performances are strong and deft. Pitt and Forbes in particular.

In *True Romance*, a wealth of talent marries a paucity of purpose. It is a relentless marriage of bullets and vitriol that lasts nearly two hours, with perhaps eight minutes of notable acting, all from supporting players. Other than in *The Name of the Rose* I have not found redeeming value in Christian Slater's screen performances. Patricia Arquette as Alabama works as hard as she can on a flawed and pitiful character.

On the heels of his equally bloody cult hit *Reservoir Dogs*, writer Quentin Tarantino drags us across the same blood-soaked landscape as before, in the company of more living detritus disguised as humans. Slater is Clarence Worley. A whore (Arquette) becomes his wife. They tool their way across country in a big, purple, Cadillac convertible that somehow stays spotless. They are carrying a suitcase of uncut cocaine which they try to pawn off on a slimeball Hollywood producer (Where do you suppose that idea came from?) for enough cash to live a life of ease in Mexico. Along the way they (and we) encounter some of the most unsavory

and repulsive low-lives ever to appear on celluloid. Believe me.

Gary Oldman as Drexel Spivey, an Alabama pimp/drug dealer, eats the scenery to the bones. Dennis Hopper is an alcoholic ex-cop, father to young Worley. Vincenzo Coccotti (Christopher Walken) is cruel and brutal, again. Bronson Pinchot turns in a noteworthy performance as the weak and desperately self-centered Elliot Blitzer who gets caught in the middle of the deal and the crossfire. In what is more or less an extended cameo, Brad Pitt turns up as a monosyllabic, stoned-out pot head.

Tony Scott's direction is pedestrian at best, and Tarantino's screenplay is a rehash of other shoot 'em ups, even paying direct homage to Walken's work in *Deer Hunter*, Copolla's *Apocalypse Now* and a stolen moment from Robert Towne's *Chinatown* - when Clarence's eye gets blown out of its socket by a gunshot. This is not a review, it is a warning.

Kalifornia is playing at Cineplex Odeon Olympia Cinema (107th Street and Broadway), the Criterion (Broadway between 44th and 45th Streets) and other theatres around town beginning September 3. *True Romance* begins playing at Lowes on 84th, the Criterion, and other theatres on September 10. ☞