

Reviews

'Criminal Law' brings film-noir flair to tale of crime, prosecution

"Criminal Law"
Starring Gary Oldman, Kevin Bacon, and Karen Young
Directed by Martin Campbell
Rated R
***½
Now playing at Cinema Three

By John Righter

REVIEWER

Alfred Hitchcock would have been proud. "Criminal Law" serves up more suspense, surprise, and noir-influenced direction than even the potbellied Briton himself could have handled.

Directed by Martin Campbell (a Briton himself) and starring Gary Oldman and Kevin Bacon, "Criminal Law" follows in the footsteps of "Jagged Edge" as a courtroom thriller in which a Boston defense attorney, Ben Chase (Oldman), gets his client, Martin Theil (Bacon), off on charges of rape and murder only to discover that Theil had committed the crime.

Within 48 hours of Bacon's release, two grisly murder/rapes occur and Oldman knows who is responsible. He is left with no alternative but to do what any self-respecting defense attorney would — he goes after Bacon. Well, at least that is what the producers would like us to believe.

As you can probably guess, the film turns into a cat-and-mouse game between Oldman and Bacon in which Bacon consistently gets the better of Oldman by tormenting him with knowledge and clues that Oldman cannot use as admissible evidence.

The ending is a cliché. Oldman befriends Ellen Faulkner (Karen Young), a friend Bacon met on a late-night excursion. Bacon then goes after Young, but luckily Oldman is there to save the day (as all good leading men should be).

Unfortunately for Oldman, he must still face Bacon in court, which presents the most tense and riveting scene of the movie, in which Bacon rids us of perennial cop Joe Don Baker seconds after Baker informs Oldman that Bacon is "a crazy killer who you can bet is crazy, and who will kill." Unfortunately, Joe Don was no better at law enforcement than he was at spouting out profane logic, and all hell breaks loose.

I don't want to give away the whole ending, but I'll just say that it is predictable and that it did nothing to alter my already pessimistic feelings for our legal system.

"Criminal Law" also plays advocate for a number of other current and controversial issues, none more prevalent than that of abortion, a topic which is alluded to throughout the film and which finally resurfaces as the motivation for Bacon's rampage. With the Supreme Court review of *Roe v. Wade* upon us, it is much more than a coincidence that "Criminal Law" is being released now. If you have already had enough of the abortion issue, then you may want to steer clear of Campbell

and company's interpretation, which gets pretty graphic at times.

Speaking of graphic, Campbell makes an excellent decision in staying away from the exploitation of some potentially graphic scenes involving abortions (both the legal and the not-so-nice matricide maniac kind), blowtorch immolations (among Bacon's repertoire of nastiness was a strong penchant for pyromania) and rape.

Sex-crimes detective Tess Harper provides us with all we want to know when she informs Oldman that the first victim had been "raped, murdered and mutilated, and I don't know which came first." Campbell replaces the actual gore with an incredible display of cinematography (Phillip Neheux, another Briton, deserves credit) that channels the movie's settings and atmosphere into a film-noir tunnel of heavy rains, black nights and bright, intense lights. One particular scene breathes of Hitchcock, in which Oldman is running down a dark tunnel that seems to enclose upon him faster and faster, a la Cary Grant in "North by Northwest."

Even though the storyline of "Criminal Law" is wrought with clichés and predictability, Campbell in making his first big screen release, did an excellent job of refocusing the direction of the film through his excellent use of atmosphere and photography and his refusal to rely on blood and guts. The producers knew what they were doing in hiring a British director for the noir feel, as they did in hiring Neheux and Oldman.

Oldman, who has received critical acclaim for his roles as Sid Vicious ("Sid and Nancy") and Joe Orton ("Prick Up Your Ears"), displays why he is arguably the best actor around. He controls and manipulates every scene with his intensity and presence, and actually makes you believe that this London native is a Boston lawyer.

Equally impressive is Kevin Bacon who is so convincing as a maniac killer that I will never be able to relish my copy of "Footloose" in the same manner again. Oldman and Bacon play off each other exceptionally well and fight for control of every scene. They smother everyone else and enabled the producers to get away with casting Joe Don Baker. Can this guy do anything but play gung-ho, incompetent detectives?

If you can get yourself to imagine that the lawyer/criminal-justice idea is original and if you can withstand some predictability, then definitely go see "Criminal Law," especially if you are a noir freak who likes a lot of intense imagery and dark photography. The direction and acting are great, and nothing is wrong with a little predictability now and then. After all, its not like it's as blatant as "Friday The 13th, Part 12," or anything that Sylvester Stallone has ever been in.

Country legend Jerry Jeff Walker shows true Texas honky-tonk style

By Shane Hall

REVIEWER

Jerry Jeff Walker is still one of the greatest singers in the state of Texas, as his Saturday night performance at the Bryan Civic Auditorium demonstrated.

Playing to an enthusiastic gathering, Walker and his band presented an evening of honky-tonk music that raised quite a ruckus from the crowd present. He was backed up by a quartet of musicians — Lloyd Maines, steel guitar; Roland Denney, bass; Paul Percy, drums; and Brian Piper, piano — all of whom showed great talents during the show. Maines' steel guitar work was especially impressive. At times, his fingering of the strings made you wonder if an electric guitarist wasn't playing backstage. Overall, it was a spirited show from Walker and company.

Touring to promote a new album, *Live at Gruene Hall*, Walker's performance leaned in favor of the material on the recording. He began the evening with the album's opening track, "Lovin' Makes Livin' Worthwhile" and followed with "The Pickup Truck Song."

Other highlights of the show, drawn from the album, were Walker's tribute to his wife Susan on "Woman in Texas" and the Steve Fromholz-penned "Man With the Big Hat."

Of course, the show would not have been complete without a helping of greatest hits material. It was these songs that received the most enthusiastic response from the audience. Especially well-received were

Walker's early hit, "Mr. Bojangles" and his version of Ray Wylie Hubbard's "Redneck Mother," during which the audience clapped and sang along.

At times the audience was a little too enthusiastic. Enthusiasm is great, but whoever it was who said you can't have too much of a good thing

Especially humorous was a song that Walker described as being about "the cowboy's real first love." No, it's not his horse, his pickup truck, or even his woman. It's his gun.

should have seen the audience Saturday night. Several annoying individuals seated near the back of the auditorium felt obligated to provide a seemingly nonstop series of hoots and hollers throughout the show.

"You learn that call in Animal Husbandry?" Walker asked after a prolonged round of noise from the back of the auditorium.

Nevertheless, the show continued and was well-received. Among the closing numbers were "L.A. Freeway" and Chris Wall's "Trashy Women."

Wall, a Montana songwriter, was Walker's opening act Saturday night. Wall's music shows a strong George Jones influence and lyrics with a sense of humor. Especially humorous was a song that Walker described as being about "the cowboy's real first love." No, it's not his horse, his pickup truck, or even his woman. It's his gun.



Country singer and guitarist Jerry Jeff Walker performs in Bryan April 29.

Live classic rock goes virtually unnoticed

By John Righter

REVIEWER

I find it hard to believe that out of nearly 40,000 students and the many Bryan-College Station residents, that the interest for live classic rock does not extend beyond 30 people.

Unfortunately, that was the case both Friday and Saturday night, as a crowd that never exceeded 30 to 35 people was entertained by Gallery 13 and The Scroocs at Kay's Cabaret in the Post Oak Mall.

I already had sampled a demo tape from Gallery 13 and knew what to expect from the Austin trio that began by playing with The New Bohemians at the Prophet Bar and Theatre Gallery in the Deep Ellum section of Dallas.

Vocalist and guitarist Wayne Sutton and drummer Blake Murphy formed the group three years ago and completed the current lineup by adding bassist Chance Walte earlier this year.

Their sound is indicative of their Dallas beginnings, reverting to the slow rhythm and melodies of the late '60s and early '70s. Even in their own material, from which the band drew most of their set, they adhere to the simple belief that classic is better.

Playing two sets, the band seemed to gather momentum as the night went along, relying more on their own material and less on covers. Sutton pointed out that the covers are only for the Bryan-College Station crowds, and that their Austin and Dallas sets are all original material.

Not that Sutton minds paying tribute to his heroes. "They are why we do it," he says.

"We like to play some covers. People like David Gilmour (Pink Floyd guitarist) and Carlos Santana is the whole reason why."

Guitarist Cockburn seeks 'lyrics with a message'

ASSOCIATED PRESS

Bruce Cockburn, who is on a North American tour through May promoting his Gold Castle album, "Big Circumstance," says: "People coming to the shows are hearing the record somewhere. The single is getting mainstream attention. That's unusual."

Cockburn — whose name is pronounced "Coburn" with a long "o" — is a 43-year-old Toronto resident who is accustomed to being known as a socially concerned singer-songwriter and phenomenal guitarist in Canada, but unknown in the United States.

His current single is "If a Tree Falls," about destruction of the world's tropical forests.

"We always put singles out," Cockburn says. "I personally don't expect them to be played. The record company has to pretend it expects it."

"I never wanted to be famous," he says. "I wouldn't turn it down. At one time I was afraid of being in the

public eye, afraid of having an image foisted on me. I sort of got over that. "More money means you can pay the band better, stay in better hotels." Cockburn is touring with two musicians.

"Big Circumstance" is being played on college radio stations, which was the U.S. launching pad for such other socially committed musicians as U2 and Tracy Chapman.

"I don't write the songs to sell causes to people," Cockburn says. "I write songs because I've been moved by something and have to talk about it." When he started, music came before lyrics with a message.

Cockburn says: "I was aware of issues, for want of a better word, when I was in high school. Friends and I used to go for coffee after school. We fancied ourselves intellectuals."

"The general consensus among us at that time was that any kind of political involvement wasn't going to change anything. I've since revised

my main complaint with Gallery 13 is that they tend to fall too much into a repetitive mode, making even the most imaginative melody seem long and cumbersome.

In paying homage to their roots, they sometimes fall prey to a style that worked in the slow, progressive era of the early '70s, but which is outdated and even impractical for an '80s college bar scene.

I have nothing against the sound, but it is one that will be just as memorable in five minutes as it is in 15 minutes.

On the other hand, The Scroocs, a local favorite of the early '80s that disbanded only to regroup earlier this year, offered its own interpretation of the '60s and '70s. Shying away from the influences of Pink Floyd and Yes, guitarist and vocalist Mark (Scrooc) Botke, bassist "Spider Bob" Breene and drummer Albert Eaddy instead worked through a catalogue that included The Grateful Dead, The Rolling Stones and The Kinks.

The Scroocs are strictly a covers band, and as Spider Bob, a three time Aggie (undergraduate, masters, Ph.D. in entomology), points out, "Don't take us seriously. We are a gigging band, nothing else, with no aspirations for greatness. Just a good dance band who has a lot of fun."

The band's enjoyment of performing was apparent. Culling requests from the audience, the band found its niche in upbeat songs, adding a distinguished flair to Dead covers. Mark Botke, alias Mark Scroocs, is a complete "Dead-head," even emulating the Scrooc logo in the Grateful Dead's ring insignia.

Botke and Spider Bob conversed frequently throughout the night, coordinating their selections with sit-in drummer Albert Eaddy. Eaddy, a member of a local jazz band, The

Blueshounds, agreed to fill in for regular drummer Will Nune. Eaddy fought all night with a cymbal stand and a broken stool, but the circumstances lent an admirable hand.

On the whole, The Scroocs are as good as Spider Bob described — covers band — but they are an enjoyable one that interacts well with the audience. Botke is especially good, and brandishes his Grateful Dead influence throughout their set, even sounding quite a bit like Jerry Weir (not to mention looking a little like him). If you like upbeat classic rock, especially The Grateful Dead (although all Dead material is upbeat), then you can't beat paying two bucks to sit back and listen to a band that adds enthusiasm and style to some already great music.

The same can be said for Gallery 13. Two bucks spent supporting hard-working college band that loves what it is doing (even if it's from Austin), is money well spent. The lack of support of local music at Bryan-College Station makes us sick, which is why Gallery 13 stays in Austin to play most of their shows. But as Sutton puts it, "Hey, it's one person who catches what I say then it is worth it."

I'm sure The Scroocs would agree.

If there are any of you who are tired of being a homebody, then suggest you check out Gallery 13 and The Scroocs the next time they are in town. Gallery 13 should be back in a couple of weeks, and The Scroocs are scheduled to be part of a three-band show at The Yarn Tavern in Somerville on May 1. I will also put in a nice little word for Kay's Cabaret. Though it is small and a little cramped, the atmosphere is great.

Handbook offers hints on cultivating Cannabis

By Wade See

CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Hey all you botany professors and marijuana growers, have I got a book for you!

The "Marijuana Grower's Insider's Guide" by Mel Frank is both a notable work on the plant *Cannabis sativa* and a great book on growing weed.

The book takes the reader through the process of setting up a garden, growing marijuana and finally harvesting the potent crop in a brilliantly simple yet scientific manner.

Far from just another pot-head's ramblings, the Insider's Guide is an excellent compilation of apparently extensive knowledge and research into the subject.

The guide delves into subjects like the plant's botany and history, scientific descriptions of proper lighting and light spectrums, how photoperiods affect the plant, a breakdown of important nutrients the plant requires and the chemical properties that constitute potent marijuana.

Frank's book also addresses security problems caused by thieves and police.

"An unfortunate fact of life is that

envy, revenge, greed and misplaced morality has made thieves or informers of acquaintances and former friends," Frank says.

On one hand, Frank says, "Marijuana growing is fun and more rewarding than you might imagine."

"Any experienced grower will probably say, 'There's no place I'd rather be and nothing I'd rather be doing than sitting among my plants giving them a little TLC.'"

On the other hand, Frank also emphasizes that growing pot is illegal.

"In all states except Alaska, growing is illegal, so take some time to consider all of the consequences. The purpose of this book is not to encourage you to grow illegally, but to report how growing is done legally, and how it may be done when growing is decriminalized."

He writes: "Warning: if your property can be shown to have been purchased with funds from illicit drug sales, it can be confiscated; a vehicle used to transport illegal drugs or to transport materials used in an illegal garden is also subject to confiscation."

This book can be read with interest and understanding by botany professors, high school drop-outs and everyone in between.