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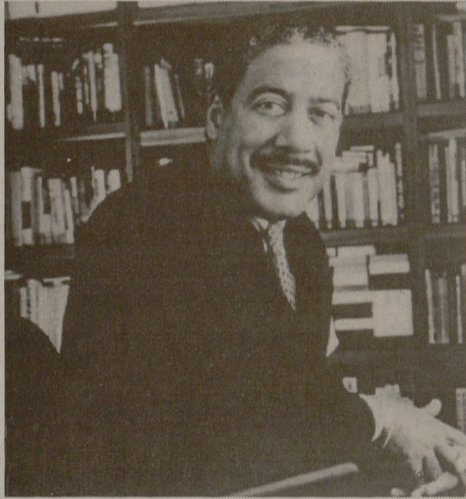
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Presented by:

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**Not all good movies found at local cinema**  
Independent films offer alternative to mainstream in '98

BY JEFF SCHMIDT  
The Battalion

From the ridiculous (*Armageddon*) to the overrated (*Saving Private Ryan*), 1998 was not a good year for films at your local multiplex. If looking for thoughtful, original fare, move from College Station. Driving to Houston, Austin or Dallas or renting the following movies at the video store might be the only way to view these films. And without further delay, the top-10 minimally distributed films of 1998:

1. *π* (directed by Darren Aronofsky) — Without a doubt, the best film of the year. This stark black and white film was made for roughly \$60,000, yet received a large amount of critical praise. Aronofsky took home the directing prize at last year's Sundance Film Festival and is the real star of this film, creating a maddening and claustrophobic mood. *π* is about a genius named Max who is obsessed with finding meaning in a world of apparently random events. He locks himself in his apartment looking to crack the numbers of the stock market but slowly begins to lose his grasp on sanity. Think *Good Will Hunting* meets *Eraserhead*.

2. *A Simple Plan* (directed by Sam Raimi) — Although this movie was produced by a studio, it has not been released widely. This chilling thriller works on every level: as entertainment, as a morality tale and also metaphorically. Two brothers (Bill Paxton and Billy Bob Thornton) find \$4.4 million in a downed airplane. When they decide to keep the money, their relationships begin to deteriorate. Easily the most well-directed movie this season, this maturely paced character study could gain a nomination for Best Picture at the upcoming Oscars.

3. *Buffalo '66* (directed by Vincent Gallo) — This bravura debut from a former Calvin Klein model features some of the most striking visual moments of any film in '98.

It's the story of an ex-con (played by Gallo) who kidnaps a tap-dancer (Christina Ricci) and forces her to pretend she's his wife. The power of the film comes when you realize it's semi-autobiographical.

4. *Gods and Monsters* (directed by Bill Condon) — This fictionalized drama about *Frankenstein* director James Whale follows the gay director's last days. Whale, played superbly by British actor Ian McKellen, becomes enticed by a young gardener named Boone (Brendan Fraser) and uses Boone as his muse.

5. *The Spanish Prisoner* (directed by David Mamet) — Mamet is known for his rapid-fire dialogue and his stage plays, but he returns to the big screen with a Hitchcockian film. A young businessman (Campbell Scott) invents a money-making scheme known as "The Process." He feels like he is not appreciated by management and becomes involved with a shady businessman (Steve Martin). The trick of the film is that nothing is what it seems.

6. *Your Friends and Neighbors* (directed by Neil LaBute) — LaBute's follow up to the critically acclaimed *In the Company of Men* is a scathing look at six people's relationships. The film combines black humor with a serious dramatic tone, making it one of the most unique and under appreciated movie of the year.

7. *Life is Beautiful* (directed by Roberto Benigni) — This import by Italy's version of Jim Carrey is a beautiful fable about love and life. Set in a concentration camp, Guido (Benigni) convinces his little boy that the incarceration is one big game and the winner gets a new tank. Benigni pulls off the combination of comedy and drama and creates a film that should be nominated for Best Picture.

8. *The Celebration* (directed by Thomas Vinterberg) — Another auspicious debut, this film is a rare visual treat. Vinterberg eschews typical film making techniques and uses only handheld cameras, nat-

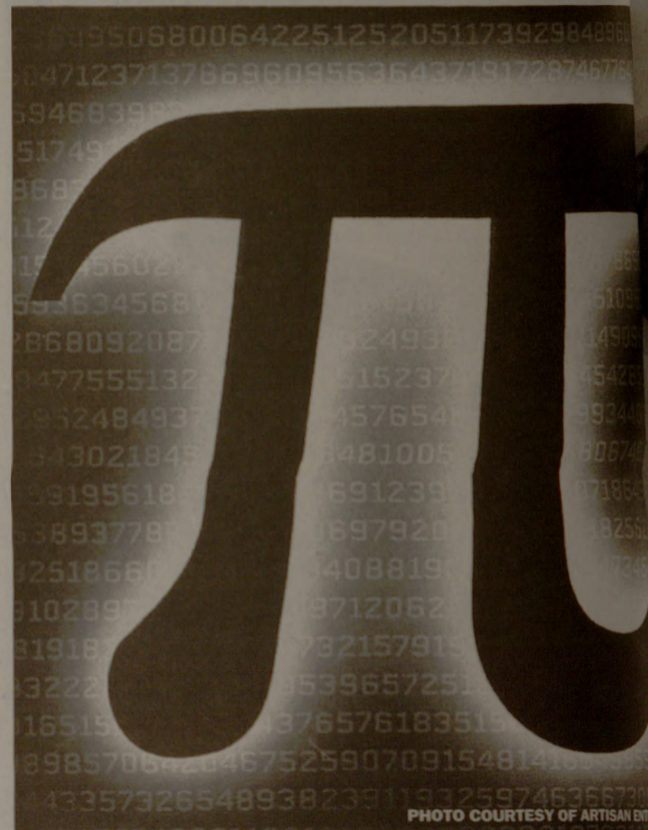


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ural lighting and no soundtrack to create a schizophrenic masterpiece. The story — about a young man's revelation to his family that he was abused by his father as a child — is secondary to the new style of film making ushered in by this film.

9. *Hurlyburly* (directed by Anthony Drazan) — Based on a 1984 play by David Rabe, this cocaine fest has been described as too talky, but it captures the essence of the play. Three men (Sean Penn, Kevin Spacey and Chazz Palminteri) ingest drugs and talk about the meaning of life. Penn gives one of the best performances of the year and Spacey is icy cold, as always. This intense film is a reward to anybody who can sit through it.

10. *Ponette* (directed by Jacques Doillon) — Technically, this film did not come out last year. It came out in 1997, but did not get a wide release and was relatively difficult to find on video until recently. It's the story of a four-year-old (Violette Thivisol) and how she copes with her mother's recent death. Thivisol gives one of the most re-

markable performances in the year.

**Most overrated:**  
*Happiness* (directed by Paul Tamlyn) — If this picture of the pedophile storyline, it may have been one of the most successful films ever made, but Solondz belittles the movie with laughably laughable subplots of a prank phone caller and a fair with a Russian cabaret.

**The worst film:**  
*Smoke Signals* (directed by Chris Eyre) — Although it was praised by many critics, the feature film written, produced and directed by Native American extremely contrived and awkward. Many liked it because it went and pandered to the PC, but it was a ridiculous farce that does not capture the essence of Native American culture.

Independent films do not have the typical three-act structure of a love story, espoused by Hollywood pictures. They instead play by their own rules, using new techniques and paving the way for future stars.

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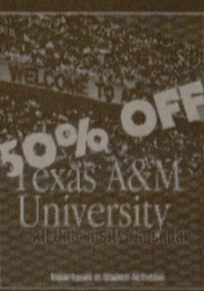


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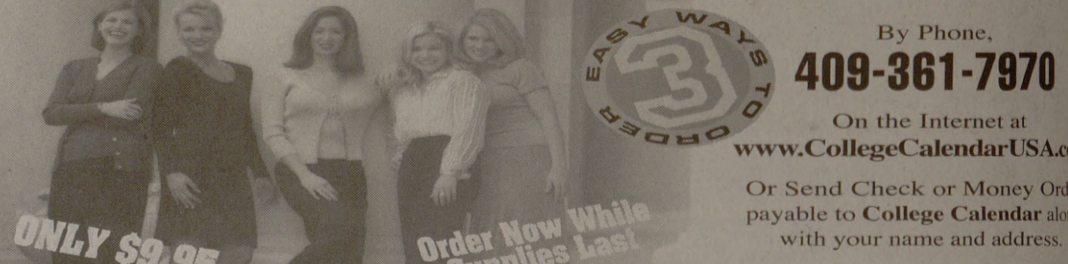
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