

MOVIE REVIEW

'Love Field' a Triumph for Pfeiffer

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TIMES FILM CRITIC

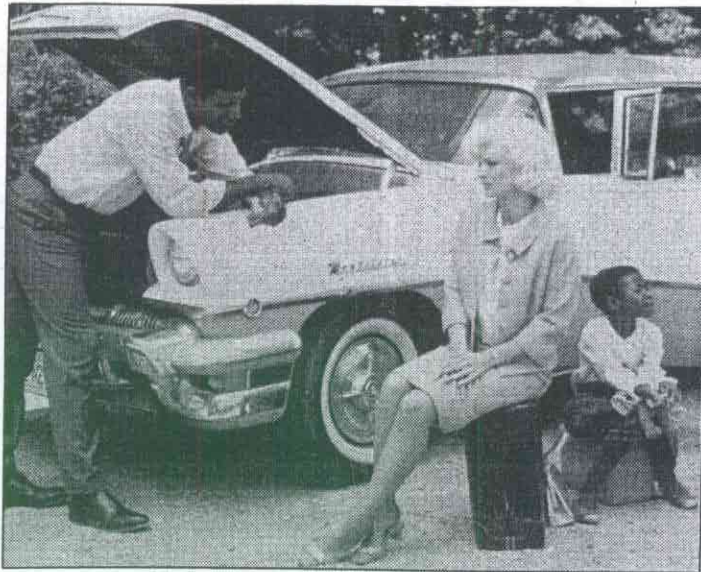
Love Field" is one of those movies your heart wants to love but your head tells you not so fast. Equal parts honest sentiment and strained contrivance, it wins us over with the latest in a growing line of exceptional performances from Michelle Pfeiffer, an actress who doesn't seem capable of so much as setting a foot wrong on screen.

Finished for months but unreleased because of the fiscal troubles of beleaguered Orion, "Love Field" opens at the AMC 14 in Century City for a week of academy consideration in the justifiable hope of gaining a best actress nomination for Pfeiffer, who is simply incandescent as the vulnerable, irrepressible Lurene Hallett, a woman who marches determinedly to a drum no one else can hear.

The year is 1963, the day is Nov. 22, and Lurene is a Dallas beauty and housewife who is giddy to the point of hysteria over the imminent arrival of President and Mrs. Kennedy. For Lurene, if the truth be known, next door to worships Jacqueline Kennedy. She keeps a comprehensive scrapbook of newspaper and magazine articles, has the patterns to the First Lady's clothes, and even wears a pillbox hat in her honor as she and a crotchety neighbor head out to Love Field to see Air Force One arrive.

Lurene's giddiness, obviously, is fated not to last, and when the news spreads later that day that the President has been assassinated, she is all but shattered. There is nothing for it but to go back East to the funeral, and when her borderline loutish husband, Ray (Brian Kerwin), can't be persuaded to take the trip with her, Lurene sneaks off in the dead of night to board a cross-country bus to her destiny.

Also on that bus are Paul Cater (Dennis Haysbert), a tall, somber black man, and his young



PATRICK DEMARCHELIEN

Michelle Pfeiffer in "Love Field": Simply incandescent as Lurene.

es, going through it with Pfeiffer is an unmatched way to travel.

While eccentric Southern women are also far from a surprise on screen, Pfeiffer's Lurene comes alive in a way that only the best actresses can manage. Under the sure direction of Jonathan Kaplan (who with equal aplomb worked with Jodie Foster in "The Accused" and Bonnie Bedelia in "Heart Like a Wheel"), Pfeiffer never condescends to her character, never treats the role as a lark the way many another actresses might, but instead gives Lurene the reality and emotional heft that she deserves.

Rather than winking at the audience, she lets us see both the humor and the sadness in Lurene, the poignancy of a woman whose childlike self-delusions and wide-eyed sincerity cannot only be an irritant but also a mask for serious pain. Though both Haysbert (who was a late replacement for Denzel Washington) and newcomer McFadden (who had never previously performed outside of a church choir) do excellent work, this is Pfeiffer's movie and it is a pleasure to watch her walk around in it.

Entrancing a character as Lurene is, however, and as nice a touch as director Kaplan has for the reality of human situations, "Love Field" has obstacles to cope with. Though the script by Don Roos clearly has no difficulty delineating character, plausible plotting (as was the case with Roos' work in "Single White Female") does not appear to be as much of a strength.

For "Love Field" (rated PG-13) is in considerable part a melodrama, filled with various kinds of jeopardy for its participants, and too many of its coincidences turn out to be not nearly as believable as they should. And while one is

willing to suspend a whole lot of disbelief to enjoy a performance as good as Pfeiffer's, even this kind of gallantry finally has its limits. Implausibility doesn't kill "Love Field," but it's a shame a film with so many appealing qualities has so much of it to contend with.

'Love Field'

Michelle Pfeiffer Lurone Hallett
Dennis Haysbert Paul Cater
Stephanie McFadden Jonell
Brian Kerwin Ray Hallett
Louise Latham Mrs. Enright
Peggy Ros Mrs. Heisenbuttel

A Sanford/Pillsbury production, released by Orion Pictures. Director Jonathan Kaplan. Producers Sarah Pillsbury and Midge Sanford. Executive producers George Goodman, Kate Gulzburg. Screenplay Don Roos. Cinematographer Ralf Bode. Editor Jane Kurson. Costumes Peter Mitchell. Music Jerry Goldsmith. Production design Mark Freeborn. Art directors David Willson, Lance King. Set decorator Jim Erickson. Running time: 1 hour, 44 minutes.

MPAA-rated PG-13.

daughter, the silent and serious Jonell (Stephanie McFadden). Lurene idly chats them up in her cheerful and chipper busybody way, oblivious to the other passengers (who view them as odd conversation partners) or even to Cater's obvious reluctance to say one word more than is absolutely necessary. People will talk, and Lurene is nothing if not just folks.

As audiences will immediately sense, Lurene has unknowingly embarked not just on a bus ride to Washington but also on a trip into herself, a journey that, through her interaction with Paul and Jonell, will enable her to experience and explore more than she could have anticipated. If this kind of road movie is becoming something of a predictable pilgrimage for actress-