

MGM, Oliver Stone don't roar to life

Counting down to an atypically unpredictable Oscar night March 30, film buffs can choose between two weekend shows taking them from Hollywood's giddy days of yore to the overwrought days of boor.

Most of MGM's fabled stars are now in heaven, and the rest seem to be mired in a fey purgatory of weepy nostalgia, as indicated by TNT's three-night, 7½-hour epic *MGM: When the Lion Roars* (★★★, Sunday-Tuesday, 8 p.m. EST/10 PST).

Yes, it's self-serving, considering how yoked MGM's film library has become with Ted Turner's TNT and TBS since he bought the archives in 1986. And there is a slavish quality to *Roars'* approach to Louis B. Mayer, "boy wonder" producer Irving Thalberg, and the star system that for decades kept MGM the primo glitz factory.

Dignity is not a priority here, with ill-chosen host Patrick Stewart (*Star Trek: The Next Generation*) bellowing a clichéd, present-tense narration upon a tacky set that badly imitates *The Great Ziegfeld*. Poor Stewart is often found in goofy poses in this hideous kitsch valhalla, at one point hanging a black wreath on mock studio gates when Thalberg dies. You keep wanting to yell: "Down in front!"

Still, camp excess has its place when saluting a studio associated with shameless sentiment and peerless glamour, an attitude that cements MGM's spectacular



GIDDY DAYS: Debbie Reynolds was a studio girl in 1953 during MGM's heyday.

place in history while ensuring its doom.

Many of the clips, archival footage and memories are wondrous and aching, but almost all are treated glancingly. The scat-

tershot vignette structure invites casual viewing, but the memory won't linger. Only in the final night, with its long sequence on MGM's musical heyday, does the enjoyable parade become truly fun.

That's something you can never say about Showtime's self-important profile, *Oliver Stone: Inside Out* (★★½, Sunday, 10 p.m. EST/PST).

This psycho-cinema-biography charts how each of Stone's movies play into a heady internal brew of sex, Vietnam, drugs, Vietnam, the '60s, government conspiracy, Vietnam, death, Vietnam, media sabotage and Vietnam. There's no question of his value as a master of riveting agit-prop, but the last thing he deserves is to be treated with kid gloves.

While producers Steven Fischler and Joel Sucher reveal how brutally Stone can treat actors and crew to get his vision across, they never seriously challenge or push him to any level beyond self-absorption. It's the same problem with perspective and "truth" that Stone has had in his recent deifications of Jim Morrison (*The Doors*) and Jim Garrison (*JFK*).

About the only revelation we get this time is Stone's remarkable bashfulness when it comes to talking about his wife. Given the short shrift women get in his movies, this may be a subject for more adventurous biographers to explore.