



Burt Lancaster, Susan Sarandon are among the dreamers in "Atlantic City."

'ATLANTIC CITY': A JACKPOT OF DREAMS FROM MALLE

BY KEVIN THOMAS

We see a woman's hands slicing lemons—which she then rubs over her upper body as she stands at her kitchen sink while listening to Bellini's "Norma." Across the way a silver-haired man watches her ritual from behind venetian blinds.

Cut to a young hippie couple, the girl very pregnant, trudging along a rural highway and arriving at an immense plaster elephant and a sign proclaiming "Welcome to Atlantic City."

Welcome, indeed. This is Louis Malle's way of introducing some people whose lives are about to converge in his captivating "Atlantic City" (opening Friday at the Regent). What these people have in common is that they're dreamers and Malle tells their stories as if they were fairy tales. For Malle, Atlantic City is America's Cinderella city, just saved from deteriorating into little more than a pumpkin patch by the magic wand of legalized gambling.

Adapted by playwright John Guare from Laird Koenig's novel "The Neighbor," "Atlantic City" also is an offbeat love story and an affectionate satire of American pop culture, past and present, by an astute foreign observer. It furthermore probes the eternal pursuit of the American Dream.

As the Philadelphia couple (Hollis McLaren, Robert Joy) approach a large buff brick apartment house scheduled for demolition, we see the same silver-haired man (Burt Lancaster) again peeking through venetian blinds as they approach the building. They're looking for the woman with the lemons (Susan Sarandon) who happens to be McLaren's

sister—and Joy's wife. Joy has a large stash of cocaine that he intends to unload in Atlantic City.

As these people and others meet and interact, Lancaster and Sarandon emerge as the center of attention. Both are intelligent, likable people struggling to get along but are trapped. A longtime numbers runner, Lancaster rapidly is losing out to the town's new casinos and is at the beck and call of crotchety, arthritic gangster's widow (Kate Reid), who lives in the apartment below him.

Sarandon, meanwhile, is determined to get clear of the man who ran off with her sister and to make something of her life. She works at a casino oyster bar—hence the lemons to eradicate the fish smell—but is taking a rigorous course in blackjack dealing conducted by a Frenchman (Michel Piccoli) who represents to her glamour and escape from her drab existence. An abrupt change of fortune like a gambler's lucky streak enables Lancaster, who was really never more than a gofer for Reid's husband, to play the big shot at last—and to dare, despite the differences in their ages, to pursue Sarandon.

For all its humorous observation of Americana, "Atlantic City" essentially is romantic in its unraveling of each character's destiny. Its people often seem in the grip of nostalgia or of fantasy. In a very real sense Atlantic City is itself the star and its elaborate process of renewal represents the death of old dreams and the birth of new ones. Point in case: In the opening credits, Malle shows us the dynamiting of the

mammoth old Marlborough-Blenheim Hotel, which collapses like a house of cards. Cinematographer Richard Ciupka contrasts images of decaying grandeur—ramshackle sidestreet Victorians, exuberant old neon marquees—with the drab, standardized interiors of the Vegas-type casinos. Michel Legrand's discreet score frequently yields to the sounds of the jackhammer and the steam shovel.

"Atlantic City's" people reveal themselves in deft strokes of humor and pathos. Huddled in a mirrored bed in a pink-walled bedroom crammed with enough waterfall furniture and '40s tchotchkes to fill a shop on Melrose Avenue, the defiantly blonde Reid, whom we learn came to Atlantic City as a contestant in a Betty Grable look-alike contest and never left, sums herself up when she confesses that she always wanted a pair of those shoes with lucite heels containing live goldfish. (Anne Pritchard's production design, it should be noted, is never less than inspired.)

Yet she and the others are capable of surprise. Who'd have expected that the dippy McLaren, a classic leftover from the flower-child generation, really is a terrific masseuse who eases Reid's pains and bad temper. Who would have thought that some good inadvertently would come from the evil Joy, the hippie who's become totally corrupt?

It always comes as a shock when an enduring star dares to let himself—or herself—look old. In this instance Lancaster's courage has paid off. He has imparted dignity to the man he plays so very well, catching us up in the adventures of a chronic loser suddenly given a belated chance at winning. The irony of this man's lifelong failure to become a successful bad guy is that he's wound up a hopelessly good one instead. Lancaster catches us completely in the man's dreams.

We want the same for Sarandon, a decent young woman who married Joy only to get out of Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, and has paid dearly for it. She dreams of dealing blackjack in Monte Carlo (even though Piccoli has told her that women dealers are not yet permitted), studies French assiduously and implores Lancaster to "teach her stuff." She is altogether lovely. It's no wonder she and Lancaster see the fulfillment of their dreams in each other—even though sadly they're not sharing the same dream.

"Atlantic City" (MPAA-rated R for some nudity and some four-letter words) is Malle's second American film, following the similarly enchanting yet dispassionate "Pretty Baby." From his New Wave pioneer beginnings, Malle has given us one subtle portrait after another of individuals who risk everything. One thinks of Jeanne Moreau turning her back on family and position to pursue a grand passion in "The Lovers." Or of Maurice Ronet calmly going about the ending of his own life in "The Within." Of Lea Massari daring to initiate her own son into manhood in "Murmur of the Heart." Of the young Nazi collaborator of "Lacombe, Lucien" who at last tries to protect the young Jewish girl with whom he has fallen in love.

The chances that Burt Lancaster takes and what happens to him as a result are likely to make "Atlantic City" just as memorable as any film Louis Malle has ever made. □

'ATLANTIC CITY'

A Paramount presentation. Exec. producers Joseph Beaubien, Gabriel Boustant. Producer Denis Heroux. Director Louis Malle. Screenplay John Guare, based on the novel "The Neighbor" by Laird Koenig. Camera Richard Ciupka. Music Michel Legrand. Production designer Anne Pritchard. Associate producers Justine Heroux, Larry

Nessis. Film editor Suzanne Baron. Featuring Burt Lancaster, Susan Sarandon, Kate Reid, Michel Piccoli, Hollis McLaren, Robert Joy, Al Waxman, Robert Goulet.

Running time: 1 hour, 44 minutes.

MPAA-rated: R (persons under 17 must be accompanied by parent or adult guardian).