

★ ★ ★ 1/2 *Bad Influence*

Oaks Four West

Most of us lead decent, normal lives. We go to work for 40 hours a week, plus a little overtime. We develop relationships and credit in the same straight-forward manner. We look forward to Saturdays and holidays and two weeks a year spent on vacation in a motel. And we have the nagging suspicion that somebody, somewhere is having a hell of a lot more fun than we are.

Alex (Rob Lowe) is the one having the fun. He ignores the rules. He dances the night away, sleeps with whomever he chooses and is liable to knock off a liquor store on the way home — just for kicks. His wallet is never empty because he can always pick up a new one from some poor, un-

suspecting shmuck.

Alex's latest victim is Michael (James Spader), a timid corporate employee competing for a major promotion. Michael is hardworking and industrious, but that isn't nearly so useful as mastering office politics and schmoozing with the boss — something his rival is very good at. All of this tension, along with a boring fiance, has given Michael painful ulcers and a burning desire to be stronger, tougher, better.

In steps Alex — a charming, Faustian rogue who gives Michael everything he wants and more. They wander through chic nightclubs till all hours of the morning, powered by champagne and poppers. Alex teaches Michael how to charm beautiful women and play hardball back at work. Everything is terrific.

But slowly the stakes are raised.

Michael is drawn into a world of crime and deceit where his boardroom powerplays turn into violent confrontations. Unnerved by it all, he tells Alex to get out of his life. And that's when the real game begins.

*Bad Influence* is a fast-paced and intriguing thriller that is unexpectedly good. The script is by David Koepp, who co-wrote last year's *Apartment Zero*, a moody, homoerotic character study that was also quite good. That movie was marred by an ending that owed a little too much to Hitchcock's *Psycho*. There are no such problems here. The plotting is intelligent and inventive right up to the last moment.

Lowe uses his good looks to great effect as Alex; he can make sliminess seem very appealing. But Spader has the more challenging role. He has to change from

meekness to meanness over a few days — a change that easily could have been overplayed.

Not Spader. He begins the movie by acting unconfident, unassured and barely able to maintain eye contact with other people. At the end, he seems tough, brutal and capable of anything. It's a convincing performance in a movie that takes us on a dark and dangerous ride. For two hours we get to break the rules and never face the consequences. In real life,

Michael discovers, that's something that never happens.



MICHAEL PARIS

Rob Lowe spreads a little bad influence on Lisa Zane in his surprisingly good film with James Spader.