

girlfriend named Myra (Annette Bening), a pretty blond who disrobes and jumps into bed as easily as some people breathe. She's a grifter too, but neither one has figured the other out quite yet.

Their simple and very tentative relationship is disrupted when Lily, Roy's mom, shows up. He hasn't seen Lily (Angelica Huston) in eight years and that doesn't seem to have been long enough for either one of them. Roy and Lily are at each other in a heartbeat, managing to insult and annoy in the subtle, direct way that only a relative or lover can.

It's easy to see where Roy got his talent, for Lily is a con artist to the core. Right now she works for the mob, placing bets at the race track to keep the long shots down to a reasonable level. Lily is also scamming money off her boss — a dangerous business at best.

She is ferociously on guard at all times: If someone said "Good morning," to her, Lily would wonder what they were trying to pull. When a co-worker finds out Lily has a son, it's not surprising to see the look of shock on his face. What the hell is she doing with a kid, he wonders angrily. It's a good question. What's her angle? What's in it for Lily?

That's the central question in director Stephen Frears' new movie: What's in it for the other guy? The cons and swindles have a certain appeal, but this is not *The Sting*. The only pleas-

ure these people get is in staying alive and scoring off a square.

When Roy finds Lily ransacking his apartment for some money, he barely flinches. At 25 years old, his expectations of other people have been lowered so often that only kindness or love could throw him off guard. Cusack plays Roy with deadening ease, turning on the charm he's displayed in *Say Anything* and other movies only when Roy is hustling.

Bening portrays Myra with a cold intensity, but she is overwhelmed by Huston. Huston is simply frightening as Lily. Her face is so brittle and tough that genuine emotion threatens to crack it apart.

Virtually every scene has an edgy tension as these three people probe for a weakness or opening. They're constantly trying to out-guess and out-hustle each other. If they were simply heartless and cruel, *The Grifters* would be of minimal interest.

But just like Roy, Lily and Myra, we're always trying to figure out their motivation. And at some point in the movie, each of them reaches out — offering a chance at real warmth and trust. Sure, they may be too obsessed with protecting their self-interests to notice when someone is being sincere. But those moments of vulnerability do occur. At least, I think they do. You can never be too sure.

Michael Giltz



Nãhbois' choice flick ('cause she digs Michael Giltz)

The Grifters

★★★★

Oaks East Six, Center

A grifter is a con artist, a swindler, and Roy Dylan is a good one. Roy (John Cusack) can hustle sailors in a dice game and make them want to buy him a drink at the same time.

One of his better tricks is to walk into a bar, hold up a twenty dollar bill and order a beer. In the split second that the bartender looks down to grab a bottle, Roy palms the twenty and replaces it with a ten dollar bill. That way he gets a beer and eighteen dollars change for his ten.

It's a cute trick, but penny ante stuff and Roy lives in the dump to prove it. He also has a



Miramax Films

Chicks fight over a guy in *THE GRIFTERS*.