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'Uforia' no longer just a still-life

By JEFF MILLAR
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REVIEW

The movie stills distributors send me go into a file, awaiting the arrival of the films from which they are taken. Every time I open the drawer, the tab indexes of the Penda-flex files upon which I write the titles look up at me. "Now, Unca Jeff?" they ask, in excited, peeping voices. "Is my movie opening this week?" The detainee longest in the movie-still file is called *Uforia*. The copyright date on the stills was 1980.

Earlier this year, when the peeping little voice had faded away to a gurgle, I put the *Uforia* stills into the deep-storage movie-still file, the equivalent to a dead-letter file.

Uforia, by the way, has some good, surprising company in the File of Dead Movies: Did you know that Al Pacino made a film about the American Revolution? It was directed by the director of *Chariots of Fire*, laughed off the screen in several test markets and would now be guitar picks were it not for the videocassette aftermarket.

I'm pleased, somewhat pleased, actually, that *Uforia* has been called back from the dead by Universal Pictures and the River Oaks Theater (it's rated PG). It's a quirky little movie, maybe a little too self-consciously quirky. One senses the film makers struggling to obtain the effortless quiriness of a film to which it is similar in tone, *Citizen's Band*, a.k.a. *Handle With Care*. But it's sneaky-funny and there's quite a good performance in it from Fred Ward.

Ward plays Sheldon, a drifter whose slight resemblance to Waylon Jennings convinces him that he's imbued with Jennings' talent and persona. He wet-combs his hair and sings Jennings' material to his reflection in the mirror of a gas

station men's room, just before he tire-irons open the condom machine to pay for gas.

In a little town on the edge of the California desert, he hooks up with an old buddy, Bob (Harry Dean Stanton), now doing business as Brother Bob, tent-revivalist and laying-on-of-hands healer. Sheldon meets and becomes interested in Arlene (Cindy Williams), a checker in a grocery store, who is a born-again Christian *cum* UFO maven who believes that Jesus was an astronaut.

Stressed out by guilt engendered by her rolling with Sheldon in carnal embrace, Arlene goes, well, a little bit nutsy. She believes that a giant spaceship will land on that hill over yonder and whisk away all those who believe that where the spaceship lands will be a better place than a little town on the edge of the California desert.

She's on her way to becoming the Aimee Semple McPherson of the UFO crazies — Brother Bob and Sheldon on the bandwagon, for the love offerings — when everybody runs into the film's finale.

Ward has a lot of fun with Sheldon. His rendition of *Good Hearted Woman*, hideously off-key, is a guaranteed chuckle.

Uforia offers a selection of medium-sized laughs, a little far apart sometimes. And director John Binder flirts with snottiness; there's a taste of ridicule in his depiction of those who attend tent revivals.

And one feels that the premise was underutilized. There's a funnier movie somewhere inside. It's paced too slowly, and it doesn't have a finishing kick. Binder could have come up with more Easter eggs had he more talent for finding them.

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