



The Penns: Awesomely awful?

MADONNA'S FIRST FLOP

'Shanghai Surprise' a bona fide bust

'SHANGHAI SURPRISE,' MADONNA AND Sean Penn's first film together, is dying a quick and oddly quiet death at box offices around the country.

On August 29th, MGM-UA opened the romantic adventure-comedy (produced by ex-Beatle George Harrison's Handmade Films) at 400 theaters in medium-sized cities across the U.S. By the end of its third week of release, the film had earned just slightly more than \$1 million in total ticket sales and was averaging less than \$1000 a week per theater. "That's awful," said *Variety's* James Greenberg of the response to the film. "I've rarely seen a worse opening."

The studio chose to delay the opening of *Shanghai Surprise* in such media centers as New York and Los Angeles. People in those cities had to wait until September 19th, when, in its second wave of release, the film opened in another 400 locations. A source within MGM-UA indicated that one reason for the film's unusual release pattern was that the company hoped to delay the expected bad press for as long as possible. And with good reason — reviews of the film have been, almost without exception, extremely negative. *Variety* called *Shanghai Surprise* a "silly little trifle," and *USA Today* described the film as a "dull, hopelessly muddled mess."

Critical comment out in the heartland was scarcely more positive: In Cleveland, *The Plain Dealer* critic Rox-

anne T. Mueller wrote that *Shanghai Surprise* "is awesome in its awfulness, momentous in its ineptness and shattering in its stupidity." (Mueller reports that when she saw the film at a regular matinee showing at a Cleveland theater, she was the only person in the audience.) Douglas D. Armstrong of *The Milwaukee Journal* wrote that Madonna, who plays a missionary working in Shanghai in 1938, "acts and emotes with all the conviction of a guest in a sketch on a Bob Hope special." Betsy Light of *The Indianapolis Star* noted that Penn seemed miscast as the American fortune hunter who becomes involved with Madonna's character when she hires him to hunt down 1000 pounds of missing opium. She also wrote that first-time director Jim Goddard's work was "mundane" and "incredibly slow."

One dissenting voice amid all this naysaying was Joe Pollack of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, who called *Shanghai Surprise* "a very proper piece of late-summer entertainment."

Theater owners expressed disappointment at the sparse turnout for *Shanghai Surprise*, and some had their own theories as to the reason for its failure. According to Ed Deblin, manager of the Fleur Four in Des Moines, Iowa, "When we showed *Desperately Seeking Susan*, people came dressed up like Madonna, but that's not happening with this movie. Maybe it's because she changed her look?"

— Lauren Spencer