

No Need To Wake Up

Sara Driver's first film, "Sleepwalk," is a pseudo-mystical yawner.

By John Feffer

It was just a matter of time before the beginner's luck ran out. After a spate of first movies that successfully challenged Hollywood—*Stranger Than Paradise*, *Repo Man*, *She's Gotta Have It*—the latest independently made effort to reach Philly, *Sleepwalk*, is

continued on 23

continued from 17

profoundly mediocre.

Sleepwalk comes from Sara Driver, a New York-based director who has worked on many of Jim Jarmusch's pictures (*Stranger Than Paradise*, *Down By Law*). Unfortunately, in her first feature film, Driver emphasizes all the wrong qualities. *Sleepwalk* is heavy on ambiguity and metaphysics, but light on character, plot and coherence.

Suzanne Fletcher plays Nicole, a spaced-out typesetter who talks in a whiny monotone and seems to lack a personality. One day, Nicole is approached by two strange men who want a strange manuscript translated from Chinese. Since one of these men is fluent in the language, it's unclear why they want Nicole's help in the first

place.

Lucky for these two that she speaks Chinese. Without asking any questions, Nicole takes the job, a hefty downpayment and the admonition that she should never let the manuscript out of her sight. She proceeds to translate what appears to be Chinese poetry, and lo!, the lyrical prophecies contained therein begin to come true, and her dreary life turns magical. Then, one night, Nicole forgets the manuscript at work and the magic disappears—along with her little boy and her roommate's hair.

At the level of plot, *Sleepwalk* is little more than an awkward Twilight Zone episode. To make up for a contrived narrative, Driver tries instead to create an atmosphere: New York City as surrealistic dreamscape. Technically, the movie features some fascinating camerawork (which is probably why the picture has been well-received in innovation-obsessed Europe). But in terms of overall atmosphere, *Sleepwalk* can't compare to *After Hours* and Martin Scorsese's paranoid vision of lower Manhattan.

Some scenes in *Sleepwalk* are effective—the opening

sequences of Nicole and her zombie co-workers at the print shop, or the pregnant fence chastizing the car thief for stealing a car with a child in it. And there are occasional flashes of humor. For example, when Nicole comforts her mysteriously balding roommate—"Some people spend a lot of money to look like that!"

Despite these high points, *Sleepwalk* remains relatively humorless. The details which have made other independent movies so memorable—the generic food in *Repo Man*, Mars' pantie-headed superhero in *She's Gotta Have It*, Screamin' Jay Hawkins in *Stranger Than Paradise*—are in *Sleepwalk* supremely forgettable. A businessman barks like a dog; a child walks around with a bird on a leash; another child insists on being accompanied across the street only to run back again to await another escort. What do these details mean? Who knows. It's only a dream anyway.

But a dream motif should not give a director *carte blanche* to put any old nonsense on the screen. After all, incomprehensible plots, unexplained behavior, and ir-

continued on 24

23 PHILADELPHIA CITY PAPER, OCTOBER 2-9, 1987

PHILADELPHIA CITY PAPER, OCTOBER 2-9, 1987 24

CONTINUED

continued from 23

relevant details may captivate the unconscious mind during the darkness of night, but they often make for baffling and unenjoyable cinema for the conscious mind in the darkness of the movie theater.Δ

(*Sleepwalk* will be playing at the Roxy, 2021 Sansom Street, from October 2 to 8.)