

Things fall apart

MAP OF THE HUMAN HEART

Dir: Vincent Ward

With Patrick Bergin, Jason Scott Lee

109 minutes, cert 15 Lumiere

Derek Malcolm

THE TROUBLE with Joel Schumacher's *Falling Down* is that the moment you begin to like it is the moment you feel you ought to regret doing so. Granted, this is partly the intention of its makers, but not wholly so. It is certainly a parable for our wonky times.

Michael Douglas, no fool as either producer or actor at tapping into the concerns of the moment, and Joel Schumacher, whose liberal credentials are not to be seriously questioned, are clearly trying for a Taxi Driver for the nineties. What they achieve, however, is something else and less — a film with shrewd basic instincts but only the power to confuse us further.

Is it simply about the hassle of big city life, or the generation of middle-class Americans betrayed by the Reagan and Bush eras, or an ordinary old American psychopath whose nerve breaks? You never quite know. The film speaks with forked tongue, every which way but loose.

What you can't deny is its entertainment value as D-Fens, the Douglas character named after his revealing number plate, leaves his car in the middle of a steaming summer's traffic jam in Los Angeles, breaks up a Korean's grocery store because the owner won't give him change for a phone call, commandeers the weapons of Latino gang members who accost him in the park and carries them into a local Whammy-burger where the manager is quick to serve him breakfast out of the proper time on spotting the hardware. He's clearly tipped over the edge, but who's to blame him?

Unfortunately for the film though, there's rather more to it than that. D-Fens, we discover, is a defence worker made redundant by the end of the cold war, and a divorced man with a history of violence, whose ex-wife (Barbara Hershey) can't risk allowing him to see his daughter on her birthday. In short, he would be at the end of his tether if everybody in the big city had been exceedingly polite to him.

There's a terrible scene in the film which gives its confusions away on a plate. D-Fens goes into a surplus clothing store, finds the owner is a homophobe and neo-Nazi and exits in combat gear having killed him. Arrant melodrama has replaced what could have been deeply ironic comedy and, from there on in, *Falling Down* falls in.

Even the more sophisticated other half of the film, in which Robert Duvall plays a cop nearing retirement, with mocking superiors and a desperately neurotic wife (Tuesday Weld who, like Duvall, is very good indeed), can't meld the whole into total conviction. If Duvall is the good side of America, determined despite everything to do what is right, and Douglas the bad guy turned worse, where are the ordinary people of America? Not on these mean city streets.

Perhaps *Falling Down*'s tensions and insufficiencies are much the same as America's just now. More likely, Schumacher and Douglas, for all their considerable skill, don't quite know what they are doing and clearly haven't bargained for the baying reaction of the film's audiences. But in the good policeman, at least, they have created a memorable character. D-Fens in the end becomes simply a parody.

New Zealander Vincent Ward's *Map Of The Human Heart* is a love rather than a hate story, bizarre in its plotting but beautiful to look at and definitely coming from the heart.

Its lovers are Jason Scott Lee as an Eskimo lad, hooked from his tribe and sent off to Montreal to cure his TB by Patrick Bergin's Arctic map reader, and the French actress Anne Parillaud's half-caste orphan from whom he is prized by Jeanne Moreau's formidable nun.

Back with his tribe, he is a lost soul, carrying with him only his lover's chest X-rays as a memento. So, during the war, he joins the RAF, only to run into the girl again, now promised to the map reader, his former friend.

The film's expressiveness runs to a love-making scene on the top of a barrage balloon and an approximation of the bombing of Dresden that is truly horrifying. But its sad story of a love that speaks its name but never reaches fulfillment, though played with the utmost sincerity, particularly by Jason Scott Lee, has a hard time sustaining so fractured a narrative. This is a talented film that doesn't quite make out.

Stephan Elliott may or may not be a talented Australian director, but *Frauds*, his first feature, perhaps unwisely placed in competition at Cannes, leaves the question wide open. It's an unholy mess.

Casting Phil Collins against type as a malicious dice-tossing insurance agent who batters on a Melbourne couple after an accident at home — the wife shoots a burglar with a crossbow only to discover he's a practical joker friend — the