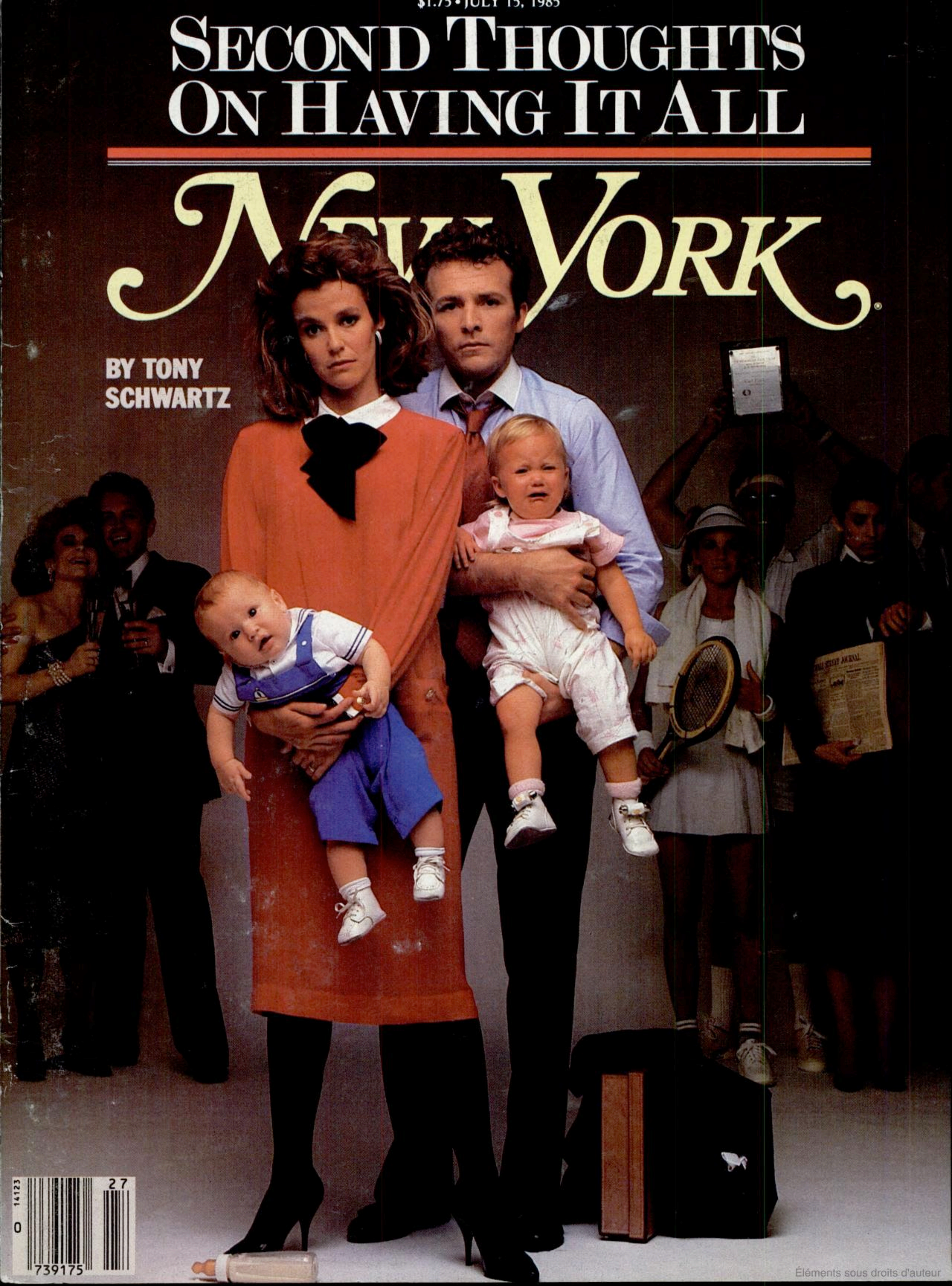
$1.75 • JULY 15, 1985

SECOND THOUGHTS ON HAVING IT ALL

NEW YORK®

BY TONY SCHWARTZ



Movies/David Denby

TIME WARP

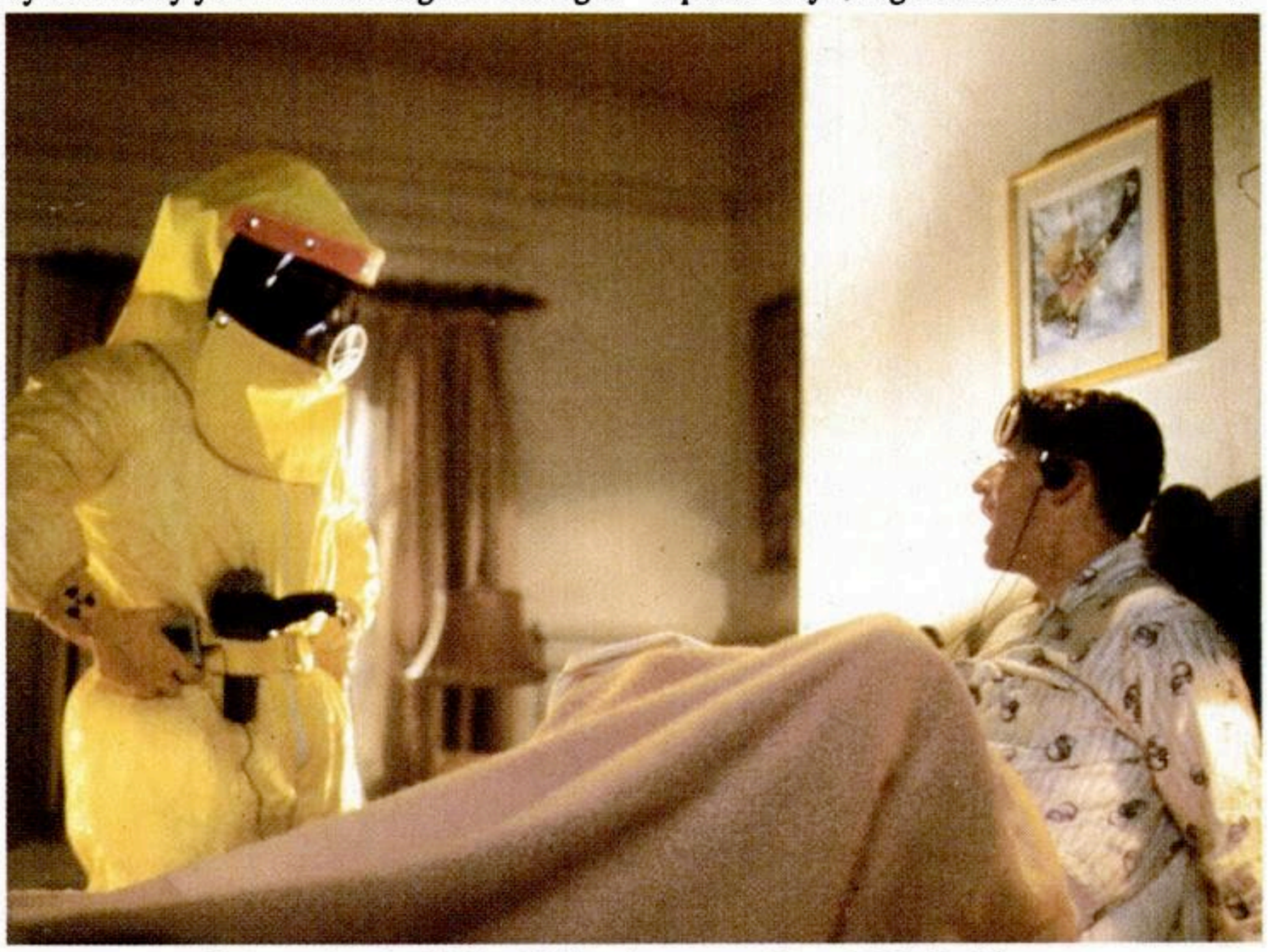
"...In its own goony way, *Back to the Future* gets at some things we have all felt about our town, our parents, and ourselves..."

Back to the Future HAS BEEN MADE from the kind of "concept" that knocks around in the brain like a bee fretting in a jar. A seventeen-year-old boy, aided by a mad scientist, travels 30 years into the past and sees his parents as unmarried teenagers. Inadvertently, he interrupts their first meeting—the fabled first meeting he's heard about in 100 boring dinner-table conversations. (*Now wait a minute, buster. If they didn't meet, then how...?*) He has begun to muck about with the past and therefore, necessarily, with the present that grew out of the past. (*Yeah, but...*) Unless he can repair the damage and bring his parents together, they will never mate and produce *him*. (*Hmmm...*) In which case he will be erased, wiped out, removed from life. (*Okay, okay!*) It's the kind of idea, in other words, that would have made Rod Serling mash his vowels in solemn ecstasy.

But even as you're saying to yourself, "This is dumb," you're also enjoying the movie. Produced by the inescapable Steven Spielberg (well, it's his season, isn't it?), written by the team of Bob Gale and Robert Zemeckis, and directed by Zemeckis (*Used Cars, Romancing the Stone*), *Back to the Future* is clever, funny, and, surprise, emotionally involving. It's by far the best pop movie of the season—by far the best of the year.

Pop, of course, is the only style that Zemeckis can work in. Apart from Kathleen Turner's performance, his last picture, *Romancing the Stone,* was hateful—an exuberantly crass south-of-the-border adventure that quickly fell to a level of cartoon boringness and stayed there. Adventure films without at least the illusion of realism can be infantile and depressing; Zemeckis, unlike his master, Spielberg, doesn't have a visual style so distinctive, so aesthetically charged, that the issue of realism disappears. But in *Back to the Future,* Zemeckis's noisy pushiness—the shallow, hyped, frame-bursting dynamism—is perfectly suited to what the picture is about. Pop culture is part of Zemeckis's subject, and in any case, the gimmicky time-travel idea wouldn't support realistic treatment. This is a movie lighted by fireworks rather than sunshine, but for once it's the right kind of illumination.

The hero, Marty McFly (Michael J. Fox), is a frustrated high-school rocker in the small Northern California town of Hill Valley. In the opening episodes, which have an odd, unsettling flavor—somewhere between that of an Off Broadway spoof and a TV commercial gone sour—we see, from Marty's point of view, his dad, George (Crispin Glover), a defeated, miserably humiliated man, and his alcoholic mom, Lorraine (Lea Thompson), who has been dragged down by too many years of marriage to George.



Future shock: *Michael J. Fox (in space suit) and Crispin Glover.*

The acting is highly variable, which adds to the oddity. Michael Fox, the star of NBC's *Family Ties,* is a practiced young performer, competent but impersonal. But Crispin Glover (new to me—he's done assorted work on TV and in films) brought me to the edge of tears. Glover, 20, has to play George as a 47-year-old man, and he can't, or won't, do it realistically. His performance is a weird burlesque, and like the greatest burlesque, it's almost unbearably sad. Glover has long, slick hair, a long nose and jaw, and endless, loose-hanging arms. Everything is loose, slack, gangling; George literally can't pull himself together. Glover makes him a figure of almost terrifying abjection—the butt of everyone's jokes, and so beaten in spirit that he laughs at his own ineptitude. And although Michael Fox is a dull actor, I still felt the depths of his embarrassment for this gruesome father.

Perhaps I shouldn't be surprised to see an image so striking in a summer movie; at its best, the Spielberg school uses pop as a conduit to deeper feelings. But only at its best: Most of the early scenes are in a perfectly conventional spirit. As a bug-eyed mad scientist, his pate garlanded with clouds of cotton-candy hair, Christopher Lloyd, a good actor, tears violently through a lot of roaring, comic-book stuff. This loudmouthed Gyro Gearloose, experimenting with a nuclear-powered De Lorean, wants to propel himself into the past; through circumstances too frantic to set down on paper, Marty is propelled in his place.

Whomp! We're in 1955, and the style of the picture shifts to that of a fifties teen movie—strident yet coy. Zemeckis and art director Todd Hallowell use the weak solid colors of fifties advertising graphics—maroons and watery blues and pale yellows. Marty has entered the pre-history of teen culture, the period just before rock broke out and altered the style of adolescence forever. Was there ever a time so evasive? Taffeta and duck's asses, pedal pushers and pseudo-hoods in card-

board sunglasses, and ladled over it all a creamy group sound—"Mr. Sandman." Cast into this strange playland, Marty has a kind of godlike power. We always assume we're smarter, hipper, more powerful than our parents were at the same age, don't we? Poor things, they didn't *know*. But Marty knows; he has the one thing that every teenager wants—a superior experience of popular culture. And on one occasion, he exploits it. In what feels like the archetypal teen-musician's fantasy, he takes over lead guitar at a deadly student dance and appalls the crowd of fox-trotters with a wailing, raunchy version of "Johnny B. Goode."

Yet *Back to the Future* isn't a simple joke on the past. In 1985, the town of Hill Valley looks shabby, the business center a drab collection of porn shops and package stores; the real action is out at the mall with its mausoleum façades and empty blacktop spaces. But in 1955, the shopping centers that would draw customers out into the suburbs haven't been built yet, and the town center is thriving. We can still see Hill Valley's roots in the thirties, and even traces of an earlier, sweeter, rural America. *Back to the Future* may be a Rod Serling gimmick movie, but the gimmick has surprising power. The past is the chrysalis of the present, but in this movie, the present, when confronted by the past, seems not a fulfillment but a falling away. The picture has been made with a shrewd, satirical eye for the sadness of American "progress."

Marty finds his dad as a young man and is shocked to see that George was a shambling, shamefaced loser even then. Again, this party-game movie hits you harder than you expect. Whatever they may be in the present, we all want to think of our fathers as strong, confident young men. It kills Marty to see his father so weak. And there's another joke waiting for him. His mom, a frozen bourgeoise in 1985, turns out to be a hot number in a low-cut dress, eager to "park." When Marty accidentally breaks up the famous first meeting between his mom and dad, his mom falls in love with *him*—and comes on to him ravenously. She literally pants for him, and he reacts with nausea and terror. Zemeckis and Gale have taken their fantasy to the limits of the forbidden—any further and they would pass over into Oedipal catastrophes too grotesque for the summer season, or any season. (Somewhere, sometime, there will be a parody in which Marty fathers himself.)

Marty's anguish becomes palpable, for no matter how much he may be ashamed of his dad, he must force him into his mom's arms. Zemeckis and Gale stick with their brain-assaulting sci-fi logic right to the end, but they don't spin off into dodo-land. We can't choose our parents: We may want them to be other people, but they are responsible for us; they

"...*St. Elmo's Fire* is a teen dream of adult life, in which you work through every glamorous problem with six friends..."

are us. When Marty realizes that he needs his embarrassing mom and dad he becomes desperately inventive. In its goony way, *Back to the Future* gets at some things we have all felt about our town, our parents, and ourselves. It's probably the wittiest and most heartfelt dumb movie ever made.

I'M GRATIFIED TO HAVE READ IN THESE pages that the young actors in **St. Elmo's Fire** dig one another ("Hollywood's Brat Pack," by David Blum, June 10), because nobody above the moral age of fifteen is going to like what they have done in their movie. On the other hand, the picture is a bash for pre-teens. Here are no fewer than *seven* characters to get excited about, and not only do they have love affairs, quarrels, and snits, but they also have *problems*. *St. Elmo's Fire* isn't drama, it's gossip, and peculiarly early-adolescent gossip—a movie designed to be picked apart on the telephone. The turbidly self-important treatment of these vacuous college graduates, each one a "type," is like a TV sitcom without jokes. *St. Elmo's Fire* is so depressing a portent of Hollywood's teen sycophancy because it not only devotes itself to stupid kids, it accepts their view of the world without any real criticism. It's a teen dream of adult life, in which you work through every glamorous problem with six friends pouring drinks in the background. But perhaps it's silly to get upset, for *St. Elmo's Fire* is less a movie than a pretentious teen product—Guess? jeans on celluloid.

Written by Carl Kurlander and the brutally untalented Joel Schumacher, and directed by Schumacher (*The Incredible Shrinking Woman, D.C. Cab*), the picture is pretty nearly a graveyard for the acting ambitions of its "hot" young cast. The sole survivor of the general disaster is Ally Sheedy, who manages to make something charming out of the yup petulance. But then Sheedy could probably be charming while eating an artichoke. The other actors will have to settle for the lesser vegetables. Judd Nelson, who always appears ready to burst into tears, reads his lines with a sneer—Nelson is both pompous and self-pitying, a ghastly combination. One feels sorry for the others, because the roles are virtually unplayable. Demi Moore wraps her husky voice around the embarrassing part of a neurotic and defenseless girl pretending to be a tramp; Mare Winningham provides glum, olive-drab dignity as a virgin with a sense of values; Andrew McCarthy grins sheepishly as a sexually repressed young journalist who smokes too much and carries in his wallet bits of paper with notes for his article on the meaning of life (it finally gets published—on the front page of the Washington *Post*). Rob Lowe, I suppose, should receive a passing grade for trying to give a performance, but Lowe in the Warren Beatty role—a worthlessly good-looking skunk whom everyone indulges—poses hollowly. Lowe is supposed to be promiscuous, but he's so slack physically—he keeps collapsing, playing half his scenes on the floor or the couch—he hardly seems sexual. Finally, Emilio Estevez, as a law student who becomes obsessed with a beautiful doctor (Andie MacDowell) and pursues her singlemindedly, seems merely nuts. It's a measure of how badly the movie misses that Estevez, whose character is meant to be a youthful romantic, comes off instead as a close equivalent to John Hinckley. ■