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## Finder's Fee

[Lions Gate Entertainment](#) // R // \$24.99 // October 28, 2003

 Review by [Adam Tyner](#) | posted November 2, 2003 | [E-mail the Author](#) | [Start a Discussion](#)

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"...but what I *really* want to do is direct." My initial reaction upon hearing that Jeff Probst had written and directed a movie was that the [Survivor](#) host was cashing in on his fame, somehow duping a production company into shelling over a seven-figure check to cover the cost of some feature-length self-indulgence. Typical net-reviewer cynicism, I guess. I'm not sure how many readers may have had a similar response to learning about *Finder's Fee*, which was in pre-production before cameras ever started rolling on *Survivor*. Some may find it difficult to disassociate Probst with his immensely popular reality television series, but they'd be missing out on an entertaining drama/thriller; *Finder's Fee* is an impressive freshman outing and shows a great deal of promise for Probst as a filmmaker.

Erik Palladino (*ER*) stars as Tepper, who's heading back to his run-down apartment in New York City, preparing to pop the question to his girlfriend Carla (Carly Pope) and host a weekly poker game with several of his pals. Along the way, Tepper stumbles upon a wallet. There's no identification inside, but there *is* someone's name and number, and Tepper leaves a message with whoever is on the other end, rattling off his phone number and address in the hopes that word will soon get back to the wallet's owner. Giving the wallet a second pass, Tepper discovers a lottery ticket tucked inside...a winning ticket for a six million dollar jackpot. He's given little time to think, faced with two massive problems. Avery (James Earl Jones), the wallet's owner, quickly arrives. Tepper does his damndest to get Avery in and out as quickly as possible, but the NYPD, in pursuit of a suspect, puts the apartment building on lockdown. Second, Tepper's friends -- uptight compulsive gambler Fishman (Matthew Lillard),



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compassionate camp counselor Bolan (Dash Mihok), and the broke and divorced Quigley (Ryan Reynolds) -- play poker every week for lottery tickets, with the understanding that none of them will look at the winning numbers beforehand. Tepper strikes out on both counts, trying to keep his guests unaware of his multimillion dollar secret, but that many digits can't stay hidden for long, regardless of how much he may lie or cheat...

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*Finder's Fee* reminded me quite a bit of *Suicide Kings*, a movie I also enjoyed. Both films take place almost entirely on a single set, with an older, respected actor (James Earl Jones in *Finder's Fee*, Christopher Walken in *Suicide Kings*) whose character is held in a compromising position by a young, recognizable group with a card game playing a prominent role. Despite having very little money with which to work, an ensemble cast of familiar faces -- including two Academy Award nominees -- was assembled for *Finder's Fee*. With no explosions, shoot-outs, high-speed car chases, and computer-generated imagery to distract, the film relies heavily on the strength of its performances, and for the most part, the cast is up to the task. One notable exception is Matthew Lillard, whose character Fishman is by design obnoxious and overbearing. When the full cast is piled into Tepper's apartment and the meat of the movie gets underway, the actors gel together very well. At the outset, though, when he was on-screen largely by himself, Lillard's performance seemed disconnected. I don't like to feel as if I'm watching a movie, but in those early moments, I got the distinct impression that I was watching someone try to act rather than me getting lost in the moment. As Lillard spouted off a rant about nothing in particular, I could almost envision a stack of plywood a few feet off-frame, next to a grip biting into a sandwich. I'll admit to initially being somewhat dismissive towards Lillard as well as [Van Wilder](#) star Ryan Reynolds, but I thought both of them held their own, particularly Reynolds, who has perhaps the most interesting character in the movie. The movie has several very intense sequences, and I was impressed with how Tepper's situation was so similar to their poker game: bluffing, knowing one's opponent, building tension till the last possible moment. Fishman points out how he's able to read the other players and know precisely what's going on in their mind, and both Tepper and the movie's viewers try to do the same with Avery, hoping to find through his behavior and expressions if he's aware of Tepper's deceit. Probst proves himself capable both as a writer and a director, and although both of those aspects as seen here would benefit from additional polish, he's clearly talented, and I hope he continues to further develop his strengths.

Bypassing a theatrical release, *Finder's Fee* hits home video courtesy of Lion's Gate, and this DVD features anamorphic widescreen video and a pair of commentaries.

**Video:** This anamorphic widescreen presentation of *Finder's Fee* (1.78:1) looks excellent, with some of the usual caveats of a modestly budgeted film. The image is sharp, though it doesn't boast an exceptionally high level of detail, and light, consistent film grain is present throughout. The palette is heavy on browns and oranges, which again is to be expected considering the dingy apartment setting, and its colors appear to be accurately saturated. The presentation is virtually flawless -- I didn't spot any intrusive speckling, damage in the source material, artifacting, edge haloing, or anything else from the usual laundry list of complaints DVD reviewers usually rattle off. Very nicely done.



**Audio:** The Dolby Digital 2.0 soundtrack (192Kbps) is somewhat subdued, and I had to crank my receiver up a little higher than usual to compensate. The dialogue is obviously the focus of a movie like this, and after fiddling with the volume a bit, it came through well. I still had a hard time making out portions of a few lines of dialogue early on, before the rest of the guests arrived and the poker game got underway. It's just a handful of words here and there, but enough to be a mild annoyance. There really isn't all that much else to discuss; the nature of the material doesn't call for crystalline highs, rumbling lows, extensive channel separation, or innumerable pans across the soundstage.

The DVD isn't closed captioned, but subtitles in English and Spanish have been provided.

**Supplements:** The first of the DVD's extras is a running audio commentary by writer/director Jeff Probst, story supervisor Jim Gulian, and producer/casting director Katy Wallin. Probst outlines the commentary's mission statement almost from word one, noting that his intention isn't to talk about plot points, specific lenses used, or details along either of those lines. He wanted to give listeners an idea what it's like to put together a film from concept to completion, and he, Gulian, and Wallin delve into how the story came together, pitching project to producers, lining up financing, and assembling the crew and ensemble cast. Some of the highlights include James Earl Jones' gift with the F-bomb, how the individual actors further shaped the movie, dealing with some of the stumbling blocks that arose during filming, such as a set engulfed in flames, cheating on the page count and subsequently suffering the consequences, lucid dreams of Robert Altman farting, and revamping a gruesomely dark ending. There's criticism in the commentary itself that the early portion has somewhat of a "Mutual Admiration Society" feel to it, which isn't *entirely* unjustified, but it still comes across as very honest, even if there isn't a lot of vitriol spewed towards cast, crew, and unnamed production companies. I found this to be an extremely interesting commentary, one that I'd very highly recommend listening to for anyone who buys, rents, or borrows this DVD.

A second commentary is provided by composer BC Smith. Rather than an alternate audio track that plays for the full length of the movie, Smith's notes are divvied up into two excerpted portions from *Finder's Fee*, running seven and six minutes, respectively. He talks about the process of scoring both in the past and present, including synthesizers, stopwatches, and sampling. He discusses how *Finder's Fee* was composed and mixed, speaking specifically about a couple of sequences and the themes for certain characters. In large portions of this footage, the music is mixed more prominently, though it isn't an actual isolated score. The footage accompanying Smith's commentary is in anamorphic widescreen, and the soundtrack is also Dolby Digital 2.0 (192Kbps).

Finally, there's a promotional featurette (3:40) with the cast saying how wonderful it was to work with Jeff and how they hope he can shoehorn them into an upcoming installment of *Survivor*. The featurette is full-frame, with letterboxed rough-cut footage of the film interspersed throughout and Dolby Digital 2.0 audio (192Kbps).

The DVD sports a set of 4x3 static menus, and the movie's sixteen chapter stops are listed on the back of the keepcase. Selecting the Lion's Gate logo on the title menu reveals trailers for *Finder's Fee* (1:48), *The Cooler* (2:26), and *Cabin Fever* (0:48). All three trailers are full-frame and feature Dolby Digital 2.0 audio (192Kbps).

**Conclusion:** Jeff Probst's debut as a filmmaker is an effective intermingling of the drama and thriller genres, benefiting from a solid cast and a couple of unexpected plot twists tossed in for good measure. Its release on DVD is above-average as well, due in large part to its excellent running audio commentary. Highly recommended as a rental, recommended as a purchase.

**Related Links:** DVD Talk webmaster Geoffrey Kleinman recently [interviewed](#) writer/director Jeff Probst about *Finder's Fee*. Lion's Gate also has an official [Finder's Fee](#) site, which includes a trailer.

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