

Success not on cards for poker drama „Deal“

Los Angeles (Hollywood Reporter) – The world of high-stakes poker provides the backdrop for „Deal,“ a latecomer to the card-playing movie game that brings nothing new to the table.

Directed and co-written by Gil Cates Jr., the dull production obviously sees itself as an updated „Cincinnati Kid“ for the World Poker Tour set, but the end result and its characters have all the originality and dramatic depth of a TV telecast.

This MGM film, opening in limited release Friday, might be ideally timed to ride in on the wave created by the sleeper hit „21,“ but potential audiences shouldn't have any problem recognizing they're being dealt an inferior hand.

Meet Alex Stillman (Bret Harrison), a cocky Yale University senior who wins an Internet Texas Hold'em poker tournament and has his sights set on the real deal.

As luck would have it, he catches the eye of Tommy Vinson (an oddly made-up Burt Reynolds), a faded poker legend who gave up the game 20 years ago to save his marriage.

Vinson takes Stillman under his tutelage and teaches him that it's ultimately more important to play your fellow players than the cards you hold in your hand.

But when a pretty girl (Shannon Elizabeth) inadvertently causes a rift between them, teacher and student face off as adversaries in the World Poker Tour, along with such real-life Tour figures as Chris MoneyMaker, Isabelle Mercier and circuit regular Jennifer Tilly, playing a lightly fictionalized version of her competitive self.

In his efforts to lend his film that authenticity, right down

to the TV camera angles and main event graphics, Cates has sacrificed the crucial cinematic element, and the script, co-written with Screen Gems marketing president Marc Weinstock, simply shuffles all the usual cliches.

There's more character development found on those face cards than the stock, surface attributes given to the roles handed to young gun Harrison, old pro Reynolds and hooker-with-the-heart-of-gold Elizabeth.

Also not helping matters is the deadly staging, which finds the two leads usually sitting around a lot, even when they're not playing the game.

Not surprisingly, the energy level follows suit.