Impure Thoughts provides a taste of purgatory

Impure Thoughts
Directed by Michael A. Simpson
Starring Terry Beaver, Lane Davies, Brad Dourif, Jason Jones, Sam McPheal, John Putch, J.J. Sacha, Benji Wilhoite.
At Copley Place.

By PETER DUNN

WHAT IS PURGATORY really like? As a child I always imagined that it was a sort of heavenly waiting room, like passing time in reception before seeing the dentist — everybody sitting in the clouds in their white robes, twiddling their thumbs and reading magazines, waiting for their names to be called. As a child my visions of Purgatory were pretty naive — it was simply a place to wait and had nothing to do with penance for unresolved sins. "Impure Thoughts" presents a view quite at odds with my childish ideas.

Danny Stubbs (John Putch) dies as a young man in the Vietnam war. William Miller (Terry Beaver) chokes to death on a fish bone while attending a dinner banquet in his honor. Kevin Harrington (Brad Dourif) expires from a heart attack during a pick-up football game. Steve Barrett (Lane Davies) chows down too many sleeping pills.

Although these four men pass away at different times, they nevertheless find themselves grouped together, each just moments after their deaths, in what they assume to be Purgatory. Purgatory is hardly a lively place: it is a small, plain, gray room in which the only furnishings are a table, four chairs, and a deck of cards. The walls are adorned with pictureless frames, each just as gray as the rest of the room.

More disturbing than this vision is the question as to why these men have been grouped together. None of them are close friends and the only common thread between them is that they attended Catholic school together. However weak this link, it becomes the springboard for the four-way discussion of the parochial school days of these four men.

The men remember the nuns: Sister Gertrude who directed the children's first communion like a German drill sergeant; the pretty Sister Joan of Arc whom one of the four fantasized as a Playboy centerfold when he was a young boy; and Sister Scholastica who gave detailed and exhaustive religion tests.

Also on the list of flashbacks are the tribulations of sexual awakening, a funny scene where one boy believes he is being spoken to by God, and remembrances of JFK as the first Catholic president. While these scenes are sometimes humorous, they reveal nothing about the four main characters. Nothing the four men remember is thematically linked; they simply jump from one topic to the next as if making light conversation over a game of poker. If these men are trying to find out where they are, what they are doing there, and why they are together, then they are going about it in a most haphazard fashion.

If "Impure Thoughts" is trying to make a point, then that point completely eludes me. Does this film want to point out some of the humorous aspects of growing up in a Catholic school in the early sixties, or is it an investigation of our concepts of the afterlife, or does it want to probe how the upbringing of these men has shaped their lives? If any of these are the topic of "Impure Thoughts" then the film fails to sufficiently develop its thesis.

This film begins with a promising premise but fails to build on that situation enough to keep the audience captivated. Instead "Impure Thoughts" leapsfrog between unrelated incidents, trying here and there to garner a cheap laugh, and tries to extract from that often flat humor some significant statement. But in the end "Impure Thoughts" is nothing more than a few jumbled and confused memories.