



Suzy Amis as Jo in *The Ballad of Little Jo*.

Movie Review

The Ballad of Little Jo

by Debra Jennings

When I sat down to watch "The Ballad of Little Jo," which opens Sept. 10 at the Chez Artiste in Denver, I assumed I would see a heartwarming, empowering story of a woman who impersonated a man to survive in the 1860's wild West. What else would one expect from a movie title that employs the sentimental word "ballad"? The movie is based on the real life story of Josephine Monaghan (played by the convincing and delightful Suzy Amis) who flees trouble at home, but soon finds that her gender handicaps her safety. So, she dons the persona of Jo Monaghan and settles in Ruby City to make her fortune panning gold.

Everyone she meets assumes she is a man because she dresses like one (even though it's " 'gainst the law to dress improper to your sex.") She acts like a man, too — prospecting, cleaning stables and, in a couple hilarious scenes, learns to herd sheep and shoot a gun. She even trains herself to eat like a man — fork in fist, arm protectively surrounding her grub, back of the hand periodically wiping her mouth.

However, like the townspeople who assumed Jo was a man, I assumed "The Ballad of Little Jo" would leave me crawling with warm fuzzies, kind of like the feeling I got after watching "A League of Their Own." After all, Josephine Monaghan triumphed — the successful life she made for herself depended on her being known as a man, and her true identity remained a secret to almost everyone until the day she died.

A strong woman, physically and personally,

she is a terrific female role model, still a rare commodity in Hollywood scripts. In addition, I enjoyed the performances of Amis and her co-star, Bo Hopkin, as Frank Badger the rancher who lets Little Jo try "his" hand at sheep herding, and David Chung, as Tinman Wong, the man who captures Jo's heart.

As I watched the film I thought about how far women have come. Jo was able to vote only because she was thought to be a man. Most of the women in the film were portrayed as whores or humble wives, neither of which commanded any respect from one of the most cruel, vile bunch of men I have ever seen.

I finally concluded that Josephine Monaghan *didn't* triumph. She played the game, very well, but she had to play it as a man, not on her own terms. She *survived*, but she didn't win. And I couldn't help but wonder, are women today really winning the battle for equality, or have "Little Jo's" just become more acceptable? Maybe we shouldn't assume victory yet.