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THE SAMURAI

Gordon Gow sees Melville's definitive portrait of a hired killer . . .

Directed by Jean-Pierre Melville. Produced by Eugene Lepicier. Screenplay by Jean-Pierre Mel-ville, from the novel by Joan McLeod. Director of photography, Henri Decae. Editors, Marguerite Bonnot and Yo Maurette. Music, François de Roubaix. Art director, François de Lamothe. A Filmel Lepicier CICC Fida production, distributed by Scotia-Barber. Franco-Italian. English dialogue. Original title, Le samourai. Colour. Cert. A. 86 mins.

peeled for him, like neo-Hitchcockian figures of deceptive normality, are constantly foxed by the craft of their prey. But the inevitable surrender must be made, as Jef had always realised, and desired (a black and seductive nightclub pianist becomes the symbol of his deathwish).

reviews

- *** not to be missed
- ** highly recommended
 - recommended

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Jef Costello, ALAIN DELON: Police Inspector. FRANCOIS PERIER: Jane LeGrange, NATHA-LIE DELON: Valérie, CATHY ROSIER: 2nd gun, JACQUES LEROY; Weiner, MICHEL BOISROND; Olivier Rey, JEAN-PIERRE POSIER.

AMONG JEAN-PIERRE MELVILLE'S very individual films about criminals, none has been more intense than Le samourai, which is probably as near as the cinema has ever come to a definitive portrait of the hired killer. The mentality of Jef Costello is wishfully akin to that of the ancient Japanese mercenaries with whom Kurosawa has made us acquainted. But Jef inhabits the modern world, prowling the city of Paris like a cat, despatching his victims in the coldest possible blood, and retreating between times to an anonymous grey-brown room where his only companion is a caged bird. The film begins in this cheerless place, the colour diminished almost to monochrome, the camera pulsating slightly forward and back like the beat of an uncertain pulse. For Jef lives constantly on the nerves he controls so well in action. Provided with a large ring of car keys, he steals vehicles as required and has the number plates changed at garage in a seedy little street. Mainly he is identified with the drab areas, only venturing to the warmth of a girl's apartment to establish an alibi, or to the gloss of a nightclub to commit a lucrative murder . . . and, at last, a romantic and spectacular form of suicide. When taken by the police, his agile mind and a certain amount of luck are both involved in his cunning alibi, but the very fact of his arrest is enough to set his employers on edge, and a meeting at Pont d'Ivry with the man who is to hand over his fee becomes an occasion of shock when this other hireling attempts to kill him, but leaves him only maimed and incensed. Jef is sought, in traditional style, by police and criminals alike, and the suspense that has been punctuated by a gunshot on the bridge is accelerated in a chase through the twisting routes of the Paris métro, which Jef knows inside out. The commonplace women travellers sent by the police to keep their eyes

The film is superbly detailed. One notes, for example, the many bottles of mineral water placed on top of Jef's wardrobe in case of a possible siege. And the swiftness of his mind is neatly emphasised when he returns at one point to the empty room and begins to dial a telephone number but stops-because the bird is chirping in an unusual way, and he knows at once that somebody has been there to disturb it, so he begins methodically to hunt for the bugging device installed by the police.

For all this, suspense is of secondary consequence to the subtle delineation of Jef's character, which is recognisably a part of Melville's penetrating style, but also owes a very great deal to the muted exactness of Alain Delon's performance. It was for this role, coupled with his acting in Deray's La piscene, that Delon was named best actor of 1969 in the films and filming annual awards. And indeed, not even in L'eclisse or Borsalino, has he ever been better than as Jef: a characterisation of minimal external show, yet of such deep interior sensitivity that one feels the tension of nerveends, the contained fear, and the personal resentment of slights to his fantasy-code of honour.

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Le samourai (first shown in the UK at the 1969 London Film Festival) was made in 1967. Its quality loses nothing with the passing years, although it returns now in a print that is a bit muddy in places and with eighteen minutes shorn (rather skilfully, I must say) from its original running time. The dubbed dialogue hardly matters, because there isn't much to be said in a movie that is primarily concerned with its central character's solitude. And all the tampering in the world could never disguise the fact that this is a masterpiece: the tragedy of a childlike loner.



Alain Delon at Jef Costello, a mercenary killer on the prowl in Paris, in Jean-Pierre Melville's 'The Samurai'