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Foster and Finch 172 in Hitchcock's 'Frenzy'

By Louise Sweeney

The word is out that Alfred Hitchcock's new film, "Frenzy," is a return to the classic English thriller which established his reputation. Vintage Hitchcock, some are saying.

While "Frenzy" is the first English film he's made in nearly a quarter of a century, it is not vintage Hitchcock. Don't go to see "Frenzy" expecting "The Lady Vanishes," expect "Psycho" instead with a garnish of contemporary ultraviolence for this new film is also a shocker dealing with a sexually psychopathic murderer.

Hitchcock is such a brilliant director, he has cast such a giant shadow on filmmaking, that it seems almost rude to point out that this new film is not in a class with the best of his films. It is no "Suspicion" or "Notorious."

"Frenzy" may fall short because Hitchcock hasn't been true to his best self. Violence has always been implicit in his films, but it has generally been subordinate to suspense and mystery, the core of the thriller genre Hitchcock is acknowledged master of. In "Frenzy" we know very early on who the murderer is, so suspense has been replaced by scenes of extreme, almost pornographic violence of the kind rampant in some other directors' films today but sharply disappointing in Hitchcock. It's a little like Fred Astaire tap dancing with a hatchet instead of a cane.

"Frenzy" like his early "The Lodger" deals with a series of "Jack the Ripper" murders committed by a twisted man incapable of normal relationships with women. As in "Psycho" the killer has a mother hang-up; early in the film Hitchcock pans up a building to where the killer is leaning out over a window box of geraniums, smilingly introducing his mum to a friend in the street.

The friend in the street, Richard Blaney (Jon Finch) is a former RAF officer with a violent temper, a bad marriage and a series of failed jobs behind him. Hitchcock sets him up like a shuttlecock for the murder rap with a series of the circumstantial evidence scenes he does so adroitly. But while Scotland Yard and even Blaney's friends believe him guilty we have already seen the real killer at work. This scene, like the others focusing on his crimes, is inexcusably grisly and offensive from its explicit

closeups of the rape and strangling to Hitchcock's perverse use of the victim's prayers.

In spite of the violence that riddles "Frenzy" there are some fascinating scenes in the film which should fascinate any Hitchcock fan. (Hitchcock himself turns up on a bowler in a pollution press conference at the beginning of the film). There is a Scotland Yard inspector sentenced to choke down a series of macabre looking meals when his wife (Vivien Merchant) turns "gourmet" cook. There is the clue of the old school tie, the familiar Hitchcock juxtaposition of opposites, using the lush backdrop of Covent Garden to harbor the murderer.

As usual in Hitchcock films, the acting is subordinate to the director's vision of the thriller. Jon Finch, whom we've seen as "Macbeth" in the Roman Polanski film is a vibrant, convincing actor not yet star enough to detract from the character credibility so important to Hitchcock. Barry Foster is excellent, smilingly ominous as the killer with gilt hair who tells a victim: "I like flowers and fruit . . . people like me . . . I've got things to give." And before the women in the film are dispatched, they're well played: Barbara Leigh-Hunt as John's brusque but compassionate ex-wife, Anna Massey as the feisty barmaid who's his mistress.

Whatever its frenzied flaws, Hitchcock's new work is unmistakably a movie, and one by a master technician.

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