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# Case of the Missing Agatha Christie

**BY KEVIN THOMAS**

Times Staff Writer

On Friday evening, Dec. 4, 1926, Agatha Christie left her home outside London and was missing for 11 days. When she resurfaced at a fashionable Yorkshire spa, her husband claimed amnesia in her behalf.

Nobody seems to have believed her any more than they believed evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson's explanation of kidnaping for her disappearance the same year. Mrs. Christie skipped over the entire incident in her autobiography, and when the queen of mystery writers died in 1976 she left behind her own mystery.

Writer Kathleen Tynan was so intrigued by the incident that she researched it and proposed a solution in a novel that has now become the handsome, romantic film, *"Agatha,"* (opening at the Avco Cinema Center on Friday) starring Vanessa Redgrave in the title role and costarring Dustin Hoffman, whose company, SweetWall Productions, produced the film in association with First Artists and Casablanca Filmworks.

(The film itself has become something of a mystery since the form in which we're seeing it has been disowned by Hoffman, who has filed a \$65 million lawsuit against First Artists in a final-cut dispute that also encompasses "Straight Time.")

Adapted by Mrs. Tynan and Arthur Hopcraft and directed by Michael Apted, the film presents an Agatha Christie who is a painfully shy woman confronted with the overwhelming success of "The Murder of Roger Ackroyd," which was to remain her masterpiece, and the simultaneous disintegration of her marriage to the handsome Col. Archibald Christie (Timothy Dalton), a World War I flying ace deeply beloved by his wife despite his unfaithfulness.

She is crushed by his peremptory request for a divorce, announcing that he plans to marry his attractive young secretary Nancy Neele (Celia Gregory). After her car is found abandoned in the Berkshire Downs, triggering headlines and a massive search, she turns up distraught and disheveled (but unrecognized) at the Hydro Hotel in Har-

rogate, Yorkshire, where she registers as Mrs. Theresa Neele of South Africa, curiously using the last name of her rival for her husband's affections.

Hoffman has the fictional role of Wally Stanton, a brashly confident American columnist, an admirer of Mrs. Christie who is eager to track her down and score a scoop. He succeeds in finding her but falls in love with her in the process. But as she regains her self-control, she seemingly embarks upon some kind of odd plan of action. Stanton finds himself turning into a regular Hercule Poirot as the suspense builds to a surprise not unworthy of the real Agatha Christie.

The drab, intimidated woman whom we see through her husband's cold eyes becomes ravishing and poised in the journalist's increasingly adoring gaze. Miss Redgrave's Christie is wonderfully gallant, brave and ingeniously resourceful, and it is touching to watch Hoffman lead her forcefully around a dance floor, she towering over him, he possessed of the intellect and imagination to appreciate

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# AGATHA'

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this most extraordinary woman. Miss Redgrave and Hoffman may be an unlikely couple but they are all the more appealing for being so.

"Agatha" is an impeccable period piece, filmed in gloriously modulated hues by the gifted Vittorio Storaro in as many actual locales as possible. We're taken into a van-

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## 'AGATHA'

A Warners release of a First Artists presentation of a SweetWall production in association with Casablanca Filmworks. Producers Jarvis Astaré, Gavrik Losey. Director Michael Apted. Screenplay Kathleen Tynan, Arthur Hopcraft; from the novel by Mrs. Tynan. Camera Vittorio Storaro. Music Johnny Mandel. Production designer Shirley Russell. Art director Simon Holland. Film editor Jim Clark. Featuring Dustin Hoffman, Vanessa Redgrave, Timothy Dalton, Helen Morse, Tony Britton, Timothy West, Celia Gregory, Alan Badel, Paul Brooke, Carolyn Pickles, Robert Longden, Donald Nithsdale, Yvonne Gilin, Sandra Voe, Barry Hart, David Hargreaves, Tim Seely, Jill Summers.

Running time: 1 hr. 38 min.

MPAA-rated: PG (some parental guidance advised.)

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ished world of lavish splendor, rigid decorum and repressed emotions. "Agatha" has much charm and leaves us with the feeling that if this isn't the way it really went for Agatha Christie—and in cold, sober reflection it probably didn't—it's the way it should have gone.

Alas, while "Agatha" is a delight throughout, with just the right deft, affectionately humorous touches, it is perversely marred during the ending titles by a song, innocuous in itself, of thudding inappropriateness. It's enough to make anyone want to sue.