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MOVIE REVIEW

'Avalanche': Journey With Pitfalls

BY KEVIN THOMAS

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"Avalanche Express" (citywide) is a handsome but routine action-adventure that sadly marks the end of two notable careers, those of its producer-director Mark Robson and of Robert Shaw, both of whom were stricken with fatal heart attacks, in June and August, 1978, respectively.

Shaw plays the head of the Soviet KGB, who defects in Milan to a team of American agents headed by Lee Marvin and including Linda Evans, Joe Namath, Mike Connors and Horst Buchholz. Shaw had revealed the U.S.S.R.'s plans for a biological warfare scheme but says his defection won't stop Soviet deputy commissioner Maximilian Schell from setting it up.

He says he therefore must set himself up as bait to draw Schell out so that Schell can be assassinated, and Marvin decides that the best way to do this is for Shaw to board the Atlantic Express in Milan and head for Basel, from where, presumably, he'll fly to the United States once Schell is out of the way. Naturally, the journey proves hazardous and is highlighted by a spectacular avalanche that gives the film its title.

Robson died after completing principal photography, and postproduction work (which included the dubbing of Shaw's entire performance by an unbilled Russian-accented actor) was completed by producer Gene Corman and director Monte Hellman, best known for such unique existentialist films as "Ride in the Whirlwind," "The Shooting" and "Two-Lane Blacktop." "Avalanche Express" plays smoothly but so blandly that there lingers the suspicion that Robson intended a more substantial or at least more involving and exciting a movie than what we're at last seeing. (The reported dismay at this version of Abraham Polonsky, who adapted the film from Colin Forbes' novel, would seem to bear this out.)

At any rate, none of the characters possesses any dimension whatsoever, and the burned-out romance between the steely Marvin and the worn-looking, disillusioned Evans seems trite. Still, Robson's characteristically fine craftsmanship shines through from time to time, especially in the spectacular avalanche sequence, and there's some passing biting commentary on contemporary terrorists that one would like to think has the flavor of Polonsky, the fabled, long-blacklisted director who made the classic "Force of Evil" and the memorably bitter "Tell Them Wil-

'AVALANCHE EXPRESS'

A 20th Century-Fox release of a Lorimar presentation. Producer-director Mark Robson. Screenplay Abraham Polonsky, based on the novel by Colin Forbes. Supervisors of special effects John Dykstra, Bruce Logan. Production designer Fred Tuch. Music Allyn Ferguson. Costumes Mickey Sherrard. Art director (for miniatures) Ed Graves. Boat battle sequence: Director Alan Gibbs. Camera Howard Anderson II. Special effects Ross Hahn. Stunt coordinator Tom Lupo. Special photographic and miniature effects by Apogee. Film editor Garth Craven. Featuring Lee Marvin, Robert Shaw, Linda Evans, Maximilian Schell, Joe Namath, Horst Buchholz, Mike Connors, Claudio Cassinelli. Running time: 1 hr. 28 min.

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

lie Boy Is Here"—20 years apart.

Reportedly, Polonsky has left his name on the film out of respect for Robson, an old friend, but Jack Cardiff, the film's cameraman, is not listed in the credits, nor is Dorothy Spencer, Robson's longtime editor who apparently at some point was replaced by Garth Craven.

Speculation over what "Avalanche Express" might have been or just how difficult a task Hellman was faced with—and it's said to have been considerable—is likely to generate more interest than anything that's going on in the film. Clearly, the filming of "Avalanche Express" (MPAA-rated: PG), with its wintry and rugged locales, was an arduous task, and you come away feeling that Mark Robson, who directed films as varied yet entertaining as "The Champion," "The Bridges at Toko-Ri" and "Earthquake" deserved a better epitaph than this.