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West Coasting: Having a Ball with Hitchcock

ARTHUR KNIGHT

Filmex, Hollywood's own, lavish version of a film festival, opened last Sunday amidst the high-rises of Century City with more than the traditional hoopla and pazzazz. Since this is the Bicentennial year, there were fireworks and a 21-gun salute, a 100-piece marching band, a light show, clowns, jugglers, elephants, and a procession of stars, near-stars and would-be stars mounting a red-carpeted stairway amidst floodlights, cameras and microphones, while thousands of spectators looked on. Not even in its more halcyon days did Hollywood stage premieres like

newest, *Family Plot*. But the best thing about the evening was neither the three-ring circus that preceded the film nor the celebrity-studded ball that followed it: It was the film itself, which convincingly demonstrates that at age 75 the Hitchcockian juices are still flowing very nicely, thank you. I'm not sure that the same applies to his script writer, Ernest Lehman (a mere 56), who adapted the film from Victor Canning's novel, *The Rainbird Pattern*. It's a contrivance, with too many of the seams still showing.

But Hitchcock's genius is such that it doesn't really matter. He seems to revel in the contrivances and coincidences, the opportunities that the script provides

October, makes a charming, if slightly sinister villain. Doll-faced Barbara Harris somehow contrives to be convincingly shrewd and stupid at the same time, a pillar of strength at one moment and a quivering hysteric at the next. Bruce Dern plays her doltish accomplice and lover as if he had been hit between the eyes with a hammer just before every shot: I don't think I've ever seen a man look so consistently dazed in my life. Only Karen Black, as Devane's accomplice and lover, seems at a loss, possibly because her role is the least motivated and most ill-defined in the film. Ed Lauter is, as always, outstanding as a villainous second banana, and Cathleen Nesbitt properly patri-

of the car hurtling by, or of wheels spinning at the very brink of a terrible chasm. Instead, Hitchcock forces us to remain inside the car with Dern and Harris, seeing only what they see—the accelerator pedal locked at full throttle, the brake pedal being pumped in vain, the hand brake that doesn't work, while through the windshield we glimpse narrowly averted crashes with on-rushing cars, a motorcycle gang being scattered in all directions, and finally a topsy-turvy ride through brush and rocks until the car flails to a halt—on its side.

Basically, there are two mechanisms that Hitchcock always has working for him. One is identification—making us feel and share the terrors of his protagonists, as in the car ride. The other is anticipation. When Dern and Harris drive to a remote cafe to keep a rendezvous with a man we know is out to kill them, Hitchcock

shows us their car struggling up a mountain road. In the same shot, he pans to a seemingly deserted pick-up truck and holds on it. And as we watch, the body of the killer slowly rises into view. We have no clue as to what he is about to do, but we know that our people are in trouble.

I won't try to defend the script, which has loopholes large enough for Hitchcock himself to stroll through. Nor was I altogether pleased by his treatment of either Karen Black or Barbara Harris (particularly in the runaway car sequence). But it is such a pleasure to see a well-crafted film again that I am more than willing to forgive such deficiencies.

Filmex presented its fireworks display and its 21-gun salute in honor of "Two American Traditions: Alfred Hitchcock and Filmex." I wish a long life to them both.



Barbara Harris, Bruce Dern



William Devane, Karen Black



Each guest was named on a headstone.

this.

After only four years, Filmex has already managed to become something of a local institution. Starting at the gaudy Chinese Theater in Hollywood, last year the show moved to the more spacious, more capacious Plitt Theater complex at Century City, where two auditoriums were pressed into service—plus meeting rooms in the adjacent Century Plaza Hotel and the Playboy Club. With characteristic modesty, Gary Essert and Gary Abrahams, the youthful organizers of Filmex, have billed their Festival as "The World's Largest Public Film Event!" (I suppose the operative word here is "Public" since, while Cannes is larger, the general public isn't admitted to all the showings.)

Even so, with about 100 presentations, including a 48-hour marathon of old cowboy movies, a free series of silent comedies, a three-day Producers Conference, a tribute to Mary Pickford, a session with Pauline Kael, plus new films from around the world (except—thanks to a last-minute State Department decision—Cuba), Filmex 76 promises an exceptionally rich 15 days (through April 4).

Certainly, it kicked off in fine style with an opening night ball honoring Alred Hitchcock, after the world premiere screening of his

for him to thrust his tongue well up into his cheek and say, "You see, I'm only telling you a story." Hitchcock himself has aptly characterized the plot structure as "a triangle without any base." Its convergent lines concern a middle-aged jeweller (William Devane) who practices an occasional kidnapping on the side to augment his private jewel collection, and a phoney psychic (Barbara Harris) engaged to track down the jeweller, who had been given away at birth, and inform him that he is heir to the Rainbird millions.

If all this sounds just a little Gilbert & Sullivan, there is still a neat, Hitchcock irony to the fact that Devane, thinking he is being trailed for his illicit operations, does everything possible to avoid his good fortune—including a couple of attempts at murder. And at the very moment that Harris is finally able to inform him that he is the missing heir, Devane's car door pops open and a kidnapped Bishop tumbles out. Coincidence may be pushed a bit too close for comfort at times, but it's clearly all in fun.

Although Hitchcock likes to proclaim his distaste for actors, he unfailingly manages to extract interesting performances from them. Devane, known mainly for his portrait of John F. Kennedy in television's *The Missiles of*

can as the elderly recluse who wants to give away all that money.

But the real delight in this film is less the plot than how well it is told. In fact, the story is at once so complex and so negligible that often the main diversion is watching the Master at work. It's the small things that add up. Devane spots a crumpled bit of paper with Harris's name and address on it. Cut to Devane parked in a car across the street from her house. Harris tells Dern that Bishop Wood holds the key to Devane's identity. Cut to cathedral spires and a tilt down to Dern entering the church. Devane's garage door operates with an automatic click-on device; when Devane traps Harris in his garage, we first see the door swing closed, then cut to Devane with the device in his hand (not, as logic would dictate, *vice versa*).

Every Hitchcock movie has at least one all-out set piece, like the knifing in the bathtub in *Psycho*, or the attack of the crows in *The Birds*. Here, it's a jolting ride down a mountain road in a car whose brakes have been tampered with. And again, quite apart from the excitement that the sequence itself generates, there is the added excitement of seeing how knowledgeably each thrill has been created. There are no random shots