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ABOVE: Frank Sinatra stars as an infantryman brainwashed by a Chinese Communist in "The Manchurian Candidate," opening today at the Fine Arts. LEFT: Angela Lansbury (left) plays Laurence Harvey's smothering mother in the re-released 1962 film.

'Manchurian' thriller stands the test of time

Here is a movie that was made more than 25 years ago, and it feels as if it were made yesterday. Not a moment of "The Manchurian Candidate" lacks edge and tension and a cynical spin. And what's even more surprising is how the film now plays as a political comedy, as well as a thriller. After being suppressed for a quarter of a century after its first run, after becoming a legend that never turned up on home video, John Frankenheimer's 1962 masterpiece now re-emerges as one of the best and brightest of modern American films.

The story is a matter of many levels, some of them frightening, some pointed with satirical barbs. In a riveting opening sequence, a group of American combat infantrymen are shown being brainwashed by a confident Chinese Communist hypnotist, who has them so surely under his control that one man is ordered to strangle his buddy and cheerfully complies.

Two members of the group get our special attention: the characters played by Frank Sinatra and Laurence Harvey. Harvey seems to be the main target of the Chinese scheme, which is to return him to American society as a war hero, and then allow him to lead a normal life until he is triggered by a buried hypnotic suggestion and turned into an assassin completely brainwashed to take orders from his enemy controller. Harvey does indeed re-enter society, where he is the son of a Republican dowager (Angela Lansbury) and the stepson of her husband (James Gregory). Gregory becomes a leading candidate for his party's presidential nomination, and more than that I choose not to reveal.

Meanwhile, Sinatra also returns to civilian life, but he is haunted by nightmares in which he dimly recalls the details of the brainwashing. He contacts Harvey (who is not, we must remember, a conscious assassin, but a brainwashed victim). Sinatra also becomes central to a Pentagon investigation of a possible plot that affected all the members of his platoon, which disappeared on patrol and returned telling the same fabricated story.

Midway in his investigation, Sinatra meets and falls in love with a woman played by Janet Leigh, and their relationship provides the movie with what looks to me like a subtle, tantalizing suggestion of an additional level of intrigue. They meet in the parlor car of a train, where Sinatra, shaking, cannot light a cigarette and knocks over the table with his drink on it. Leigh follows him to the space

between cars, lights a cigarette for him and engages him in a very weird conversation, after which they fall in love and she quickly ditches her fiancé. What's going on here? My notion is that Sinatra's character is a Manchurian killer, too—one allowed to remember details of Harvey's brainwashing because that would make him seem more credible. And Leigh? She is Sinatra's controller.

This possible scenario simply adds another level to a movie already rich in intrigue. The depths to

which the Lansbury character will sink in this movie must be seen to be believed, and the actress generates a smothering momism that defines the type. By the end of the film, so many different people have used so many different strategies on Harvey's overtaxed brain that he is almost literally a zombie, unable to know what to believe, incapable of telling

who can be trusted.

"The Manchurian Candidate" got glowing reviews when it was first released in 1962 (Pauline Kael wrote, "It may be the most sophisticated political satire ever made in Hollywood"). But then it was shelved in a dispute between United Artists and Sinatra, who held a controlling interest in the film and thought the studio was using funny bookkeeping to keep it out of the profit column. For more than 25 years, memories of "The Manchurian Candidate" have tantalized those who saw it at the time.

Was it really as good as it seemed? It was.



Roger Ebert

The Manchurian Candidate ★★★★

Bennett Marco
Raymond Shaw
Rosie
Raymond's mother:
Chunjin
Sen. John Iselin
Jocie
Sen. Thomas Jordan
Yen Lo
Cpl. Melvin

Frank Sinatra
Laurence Harvey
Janet Leigh
Angela Lansbury
Henry Silva
James Gregory
Leslie Parrish
John McGiver
Khligh Dhiegh
James Edwards

United Artists re-releases a film directed by John Frankenheimer. Produced by George Axelrod and Frankenheimer. Written by Axelrod, based on the novel by Richard Condon. Photographed by Lionel Lindon. Edited by Ferns Webster. Music by David Amran. Running time: 126 minutes. No MPAA classification. At the Fine Arts.