

MOVIES

By Larry MacDonald

Eyewitness

Directed by Peter Yates
Starring Sigourney Weaver, William Hurt, James Woods, Christopher Plumber

"Eyewitness," the new film by the writer-director team that gave us the delightful "Breaking Away," stars William Hurt and Sigourney Weaver as an unlikely pair of lovers caught up in a murder mystery plot that is as improbable as it is lacking in suspense.

One central problem is that screenwriter Steve Tesich has incorporated so many diverse elements that it takes excessive amounts of screen time to cross-cut between them. First we encounter Darryl Deever (Hurt), a Vietnam veteran who works as a janitor in a stately old office building. His friend Aldo (James Woods), also a vet and janitor, has been fired for insulting a Vietnamese entrepreneur who has an office in this same building, and Darryl attempts unsuccessfully to speak to the businessman on Aldo's behalf. We then follow Darryl as he rides home on his motorcycle, plays with his dog, and watches a videotape of a local news show which features Tony Sokolow (Miss Weaver) as a feature reporter. We soon learn that Darryl has a crush on her.

In a subsequent scene we see Tony at the piano, performing chamber music with her parents, affluent Jewish immigrants who work, together with Tony's fiance Joseph (Christopher Plummer), to relocate Russian Jews.

The murder plot enters in as Darryl discovers the strangled body of the Vietnamese businessman. He begins to suspect Aldo (who has admitted his hatred of Orientals), and the police suspect both of them. Tony, meanwhile, has been assigned to find out what Darryl knows. After a TV interview with him outside the building on the day of the killing.

From this point on, director Peter Yates stages an elaborate choreography of chases, stalkings, and attempted kidnappings, as the police continue their pursuit. There are so many cars chasing other vehicles, it is a wonder that nowhere do they collide into each other. In fact, it is a wonder that no one at any time ever suspects that he or she is being followed.

Despite some good action scenes, Yates allows things to drag a bit as the murderer's identity is finally revealed, and Darryl's life is endangered, because he is thought to be an eyewitness to the murder. One of the many ironies about this film is that, unlike the film's title, there really is no eyewitness to the murder. But Darryl, seeing the possibility of Tony becoming interested in him as a witness, coyly suggests that he may know more than he cares to reveal. Thus, her pursuit of him, and their eventual romantic involvement.

There are several engaging scenes when the two stars are together. More so than in his only previous film, "Altered

States," William Hurt reveals in this film a talent for portraying a nice, decent, average guy, who just might have more to him than meets the eye. His facial expressions convey a true sincerity. When he smiles at Weaver, you know what he is feeling. Weaver, in turn, gets a chance to go beyond her one previous role in "Alien". Perhaps her role is a bit over-reminiscent of Jane Fonda's in "The China Syndrome," but she still projects convincingly.

In supporting roles, Woods comes across as malevolently as he did as the cop-killer in "The Onion Field," and Plummer once again has a debonair, charming exterior, with a less likeable side hidden beneath.

The actors are so good, it's fortunate that they don't get more to do. Still, writer Tesich does show, after two films, a great deal of promise. He knows how to construct character. Now he has to work on the plot.

TESS

Directed by Roman Polanski
Starring Natassia Kinski, Peter Firth, Leigh Lawson

Once in a very great while there comes along a motion picture for which the adjective "beautiful" applies. "Tess" is such a film, an exquisitely photographed portrait of 19th Century rural England as seen through the eyes of young Tess Durbeyfield, eldest daughter of a poor farming family. The chronicle of this lovely, headstrong Thomas Hardy heroine takes almost three hours of screen time to tell, but director Roman Polanski guides viewers skillfully through an episodic saga that begins with Tess (Natassia Kinski) being sent to a wealthy family that is thought to be distantly related to them in order to get financial help. She is seen seduced by one member of this family, Alec D'Urberville (Leigh Lawson), and she returns home, where she bears his child, which soon dies.

Undaunted, she sets out once again, this time to work for a dairy farmer. She soon meets and falls in love with Angel Clare (Peter Firth), a minister's son and apprentice farmer. Unable to tell him of her shameful secret, Tess writes a letter and places it under his door, but she later discovers that he hasn't read it because it was hidden under the rug; and she retrieves and hides the letter, and thus their marriage takes place without Angel knowing the truth.

Ironically, on their wedding night, Angel confesses to having had a liaison with an older woman, and is promptly forgiven; but when it is Tess's turn to reveal her secret, Angel rejects her, telling her that she is no longer the woman he loves. As is typical with Victorian era morality, the heroine suffers from the double standard. (We are not allowed to speculate on what might have been if Angel had indeed read the letter, thus we must accept his petulant stance.) Tess undergoes further travails, and eventually winds up with Alec again, as



Sigourney Weaver in "Eyewitness"

his mistress, in exchange for his promise to help her impoverished family, which is homeless in the wake of her father's death.

When Angel returns after a year in Brazil, he wants Tess, but she rejects him, knowing that Alec's hold over her is akin to bondage. Again fate plays its hand as Tess performs a desperate act in order to rejoin Angel, but their reunion is shortlived.

To tell more would be to spoil the pleasure of experiencing the story firsthand, so I won't divulge any more. I will say, however, that "Tess" is blessed with an uncommonly intelligent script by Polanski, who wrote it in collaboration with Gerard Brach and John Brownjohn. Scenes from the novel have been painstakingly reconstructed and condensed with much of the actual Hardy dialogue preserved. The result is as faithful an adaptation as anyone has a right to expect, and, at the same time, thanks to the combined cinematographic talents of the late Geoffrey Unsworth and of Ghislain Cloquet, and the lyrical score by Phillippe Sarde, the movie "Tess" becomes a poetically visual and aural extension of the original.

Polanski's choice of actress for Tess is an inspired one. While not yet in complete command of her acting skill, Kinski has just the right physical presence, with an intense purity of facial features reminiscent of the young Ingrid Bergman. At first her Germanic background may be a bit of a drawback for her speaking voice, but, after a while, one comes to accept her enunciation without question. As the men in her lives, both Lawson and Firth are appropriately intense in their roles, with Lawson particularly effective in conveying the sense of passion that drives Alec to repeatedly take advantage of

Tess.

From the idyllic beauty of the opening May-day dance scene, in which the color camera catches the shifting moods of the progressively waning daylight, to the closing scene at Stonehenge, captured in a misty morning splendor, "Tess" provides viewers with the opportunity to discover what cinematic beauty is all about. It is unquestionably Polanski's finest hour, and, for us, three of the finest hours that we will ever spend in a darkened theater.

THEATRE

Becket Martyred

The Flint Community Players presents this week *Becket*, a Jean Anouilh historical drama directed by Pat Victor based on the friendship between King Henry II of England and St. Thomas a Becket.

From a technical standpoint, the play was well-planned with imaginative set design, inventive costuming and lighting that counterbalanced the tendency towards drabness. John Brizzell, Vickie Roesner and Gary Jones are responsible for creating an interesting and workable atmosphere for the actors.

Unfortunately, the acting did not equal the quality of the technical design. Several actors did exhibit potential, though, and were somewhat satisfying to watch. Paul Wolf as Thomas a Becket showed a gentle, searching sensitivity. His voice is pleasant to hear but he has an unfortunate tendency to speak too softly. Many of his best lines were lost. Jim Engle as King Henry was energetic and attempted to take charge of his staging areas. His characterization often lost its sense of royalty and degenerated into rowdiness. Sue E. Johnson as the woman who wants Thomas and is wanted by Henry is a spot of prettiness in the first act, especially in her beautifully sung lament to the men. And Jackie Kramer as the old Queen is properly crusty and hateful.

Various accents were attempted by the cast and should not have been. They were unpolished, sometimes comical and were always a distraction.

Ms. Victor had trouble moving her actors around the stage. Movement was often messy and incoherent. Actors sometimes spoke their lines to the back wall or into the air beside other actors. More thoughtful planning needs to be done to make the actors' blocking appear more natural and less slapdash and thrown together. Actors also failed to react facially and physically to others' speeches and often appeared dead or lethargic.

Becket is a carefully written play. There are many beautiful words that touch the heart and soul and arouse many, many different emotions. There is anguish in this play and pain that surround the manipulations of Henry in his deep friendship with Thomas. The director failed to help the actors bring these feelings out in their characterizations. The interpretations were not infused with life and spirit and there was no build in action to the play's dramatic climax. The lines were said but they were not felt and lived out in the play's context.

It's a shame this fine play wasn't given more care and polish. Instead of tearing through the heart and mind and leaving a tear in the eye it sits—soggy and dull.

—R.J. Preston

99^c
ALL SEATS

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2nd ST. DOWNTOWN 234-2820

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