



Michael Douglas portrays a judge who sits for his father and, Sharon Gless is the sympathetic wife in "Star Chamber."

**the movies**  
**Louise Snider**

## 'Star Chamber' overdoes story of judges' battle

Swimming against the summer tide of escapist film fare is "Star Chamber" (R). Don't let the title fool you; it's not another spy-adventure. The title refers to a special court that meets secretly, without a jury, to deal out its own arbitrary sentences.

The star chamber of this movie is a group of Los Angeles Superior Court judges who have joined together to construct an overweight legal system that is often tipped in favor of the criminals. The argument is that criminals are being set free because of loopholes in the laws.

The movie begins with grim realism as we follow two cases to court. Both cases are geared to attract attention from an audience. One involves the threat of safety cameras and their social security checks, the other concerns a violent anti-pornography ring that does out torture and murder.

Both cases rest on evidence obtained under circumstances which are ruled to be an invasion of privacy. Consequently, the cases are dismissed and the defendants are released.

Michael Douglas stars as the judge who hears these cases and is tormented by the knowledge that he is releasing killers to kill again. Yet, he has no choice because he knows that if he did not dismiss the cases, they would be overturned in a higher court because of the way the evidence was obtained.

SCRIPTWRITERS Peter Hyams (who also directed) and Jackson Taylor are determined to arouse our anger and outrage, but their script is as flawed and full of loopholes as the legal system they attack.

A judge who is about to be given a major civic award shoots himself. This is never tied into other events in the movie. A detective (Yaphet Kotto) suspects that the two men accused of the child-pornography murders are not the real culprits, but the movie doesn't give us a clue as to why he thinks they are innocent.

He knows the two men are hanging out at an abandoned warehouse, but he's not curious enough to see what's going on there. Most improbable and incredible of all, the script has Douglas, the judge, independently going out to deal with criminals. The character is a complete nitwit.

The editing of this movie is atrocious. The action is disjointed and difficult to follow. There is nothing but confusion as the film bounces back and forth from the street to the courtroom to the judge's home to a police squadroom to a chase in a parking garage. Douglas is wooden in his role. He puts his hands to his head to indicate concern and that's about it. Hal Holbrook, as an older judge and mentor who recruits Douglas for the star chamber, relies on his "folksy" routine.

THERE ARE BRIGHT performances from Sherry Stone as the judge's intelligent, understanding wife and DeWayne Benson as a nervous car thief. They are the exceptions, not the rule.

"Star Chamber" may have set out to be a socially minded movie, but it doesn't come close to developing its early promise. However, as a vehicle trading on public fear and agitation about our criminal justice system, it may find an audience.

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**what's at the movies**

**CLASS (R)**. Romantic comedy about a young man who has to fall for an older woman who turns out to be his mother's mother. Jacqueline Bisset, Cliff Robertson and Bob Long.

**CUJO (R)**. Suspenseful film based on story by Michael Crichton. Debra Winger, Christopher Stone and Ed Lantieri.

**FLASHDANCE (R)**. A determined young woman works as a waitress by day and a dancer by night. More than makes up for her sense but the dancing makes a terrific impact.

**GETTING IT ON (R)**. Two boys with active imaginations and overactive glands indulge in crazy antics on campus. Jonathan Demme and Heather Kennedy star in comedy without sex appeal.

**NATIONAL LAMPOON'S VACATION (R)**. Walter Wolf, the world's greatest theme park, is the destination in this country comedy starring Chevy Chase, Beverly Sills, Gene Hackman, Gene Coca and Christie Brinkley.

**OCTOPUSSY (PG)**. Roger Moore is again the danger agent. He goes to India to crack an international jewel-smuggling operation in this 19th James Bond adventure. Also with Paul Adams.

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