



Clint Eastwood is back again as Dirty Harry in "Sudden Impact," a film he also produced and directed.

'Sudden Impact' is criminally bad

Tom Panzenhagen is this week's guest critic.

One walks into "Sudden Impact," Clint Eastwood's fourth film as San Francisco police detective Dirty Harry Callahan, with a good deal of optimism. The original "Dirty Harry" (1971), in the hands of director Don Siegel, defined the genre of revenge films so popular in the 1970s. The sequel, "Magnum Force" (1973), was a disappointment, but Harry rebounded with a vengeance in "The Enforcer" three years later.

Eastwood directed "Sudden Impact," and that, too, is cause for optimism. The angular actor, now so famous in the spaghetti westerns of the late-1960s, but the best film of that genre, "High Plains Drifter" (1973), was directed by Eastwood himself.

So all the ingredients are at hand: proven talent on both sides of the camera, a time-tested formula and audience-approved subject matter. That's why it's terribly disappointing when "Sudden Impact" unfolds as a series of unrelated, anticlimactic brutalities.

"Sudden Impact" is in trouble almost from the outset. A stylish opening — in which Harry interrupts a robbery and, with Magnum aimed squarely at the head of one of the perpetrators, utters the movie season's best catch phrase, "Go ahead, make my day" — is the best thing in the film. But it's downhill from there.

The plot concerns a woman who takes revenge on the five men (and their female accomplice) who raped her and her sister 10 years earlier. It's a sure sign of trouble when a "Dirty Harry" film stoops to provide motivation for a villain.

The woman, Jennifer Spencer, is played by Sondra Locke. There's no attempt to conceal her identity in order to add suspense to the story. That's because screenwriter Joseph Sinison has something else in mind. He wants to establish parallels between Spencer and Harry Callahan.

Her attackers were never jailed — not because of inadequacies in the judicial system but in law enforcement, as it turns out — so, like Harry in the past, Spencer sets out to dispense her own brand of justice.

There are two things wrong with this. First, there are few plot devices more labored than having a character kill several other characters one-by-one. The audience knows the killings are coming and that they are justified — at least in the context of the film. So there's nothing to do but endure the brutality until Harry's investigation catches up with what everyone else already knows.

The second problem is that Sondra Locke is not actress enough to pull off the parallel personalities twist. When, for instance, early in the film, a judge cites a legal technicality and frees a dirtball, anguished shows in every bulging vein in Harry's face, the squint of his eyes, the resolute firmness of his jaw.

When Jennifer flashes back on her attack, when she listens to the whips of a victim before executing him, Locke's glassen demeanor more resembles a high school student stupified by a teacher's question than a vengeance-crazed killer.

SOMEONE APPARENTLY recognized the script's deficiencies, too, because the film falls back on prominent subplots (though applying the term "plot" to these events may be an overstatement).

For different reasons, a cadre of mob hit men and three other punks are out to get Harry in the night. These subplots have no bearing on the main theme, but do provide ample opportunity for gunplay, with Harry inevitably getting in the final burst.

Even a sequence in which Harry pursues a bank robber through the streets of a small California town — in a commandeered bus loaded with senior citizens — is thrown in. Certainly after three films Harry's character is well-defined, so what might pass for character development in another time and place is simply superfluous here.

"Dirty Harry" films at their best pulsate, menace, even amuse. "Sudden Impact" drags, fails to menace and its idea of humor is a urinating, flatulent bulldog. That's a shame, because "Sudden Impact" is sure to find an audience, and that may be the biggest miscarriage of justice of all.

table talk

Pasta dinners

Free pasta dinners for two will be awarded to five winners a night in a drawing held for five nights at Uptown Charley's in Madison Heights. Chuck Muer's family tavern across the road from the Abbey Theatre is offering the dinners as a tie-in with the movie, "Two of a Kind," opening Friday at the Abbey. The movie stars John Travolta and Olivia Newton-John as a couple whose romance develops over dinner for two. Uptown Charley's also will be the scene of a post-event party after the film's preview Thursday.

Christmas sing

Customers are being invited to join in a Christmas Carol Sing from 5-7:30 p.m. Wednesday at the Wagon Wheel Saloon at Rochester and Big Beaver roads in Troy. Media personalities will lead the carol singing, accompanied by Salvation Army musicians. In a benefit for the Salvation Army, David Hagelestein, owner of the Wagon Wheel, said he hopes to make the event an annual one.

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