

MOVIES

Intriguing 'Suspects' keeps you guessing until the end



JOHN MONAGHAN

From the beginning you know it's gone wrong. On the boat where a heist has just taken place, a mysterious figure douses the deck with gasoline while another man, injured, looks on. A flick of a match and the ship turns into a inferno.

How the caper crumbles is at the heart of "The Usual Suspects," a complicated thriller about five guys who unite for a fateful bit of larceny. It opens Friday for an exclusive run at the Maple and Main Art Theatres.

Flashback several days earlier. Five guys, small and big time hoodlums, get dragged into a New York police station on suspicion of hijacking a truckload of guns. Most are strangers to each other, but by the time they're sprung, they've hatched a plan that takes them to the West Coast. Giving away the twists and

turns that follow wouldn't be fair, but the boys do get involved with the legendary Keyser Soze. Some say he's the devil; others are skeptical that he even exists.

Gabriel Byrne, who specializes in downbeat characters, plays Keaton, the most notorious of these hoodlums. Verbal Kint (Kevin Spacey), the quick-talking brains of the outfit and a cripple, sees little of the coldblooded killer that the police insist Keaton is.

As sole survivor of the failed boat heist, Verbal is dragged in for questioning by a relentless police inspector (Chazz Palminteri) and it's in this sparring, with two stage-trained actors, that the performances in "The Usual Suspects" really shine.

Byrne can play this kind of part in his sleep and appears to do so on several occasions. The others (including Stephen, least talented of the busy Baldwin brothers) don't have enough personality quirks or background to make them stand out from the crowd. Producer/director Bryan Singer, a recent winner at Sundance,

REVIEW

approaches the movie with a certain amount of flair. He uses slow zooms in the interrogation scenes and places his actors at the edge of the frame, as if he's afraid that he'll lose his audience if his shots grow too static.

Maybe I've been spoiled by the films of Quentin Tarantino, but Christopher McQuarrie's dialogue doesn't read all that cleverly. Sure it's hardboiled and hot-headed, with well-placed profanity, but often self-consciously so.

With its intentionally confusing narrative structure, "The Usual Suspects" certainly keeps an audience on its toes. But at the heart it's really no better than a superior episode of one of TV's current crime dramas.

To leave a message for John Monaghan, dial 953-2047, mailbox number 1866, on a touch-tone phone, fax him a note at 591-7279, or write him in care of Entertainment, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia 48150.



Suspects: Hockney (Kevin Pollak, left to right), McManus (Stephen Baldwin), Fenster (Benicio Del Toro), Keaton (Gabriel Byrne) and Verbal (Kevin Spacey) run the gamut of height and attitude in "The Usual Suspects."

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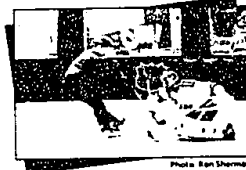
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