



Josef Sommer plays George Bynum, an antiques expert for a prestigious auction gallery who turns up as a murder victim in "Still of the Night." Assistant Meryl Streep is the chief suspect in the movie which is rife with references to its spiritual master, Alfred Hitchcock.

the movies

Louise Snider

'Still of the Night' copies Hitchcock without arty story

"Still of the Night" (PG) is a white-knuckle movie from the startling opening to the tension-filled ending. It is also something of a miracle because it bristles with suspense even though the story deals with two dull and foolish characters.

Robert Benton directed it from his own screenplay, and took more than a page or two from the notebook of the master, Alfred Hitchcock. The movie is awash with references to, or quotes from, Hitchcock movies, including "Spellbound," (a dream sequence), "Rear Window" (a peeping-Tom view into an apartment) and "Vertigo" (a narrative description of a fall from a bell tower). Even one of the principal settings, an auction gallery, calls to mind a key scene from "North by Northwest."

In addition to such distinguished precedent, Benton has the advantage of Nestor Almendros' shadowy, mood-filled photography and the high-powered presence of Meryl Streep and Roy Scheider. This should add up to the "psychological thriller" the publicity leads us to expect. Instead we get a movie in which the psychology has little to do with the suspense — created by superb use of sound, lighting, photography and editing. The story is disappointing.

SCHNEIDER PLAYS a psychiatrist whose patient (Josef Sommer) has been found murdered. When the victim's lover (Meryl Streep) shows up at the psychiatrist's office, the recently divorced doctor finds himself attracted to her. His interest is unadorned, or maybe even excited, by police suspicions that the murderer is a woman.

From what the psychiatrist learns as he reviews tapes of his sessions with the murdered man and from what the police theorize, everything points toward Streep. Is the doctor in love with a killer? Why is he attracted to her? Is it all that nervous twitching and the kinky behavior?

Streep's character would put off anyone except a mental-health professional. However, Schneider's interest seems more than professional. I say "seems" because both these characters are so cold, when they kiss it's like two icebergs sliding against each other. There is no warmth there. They don't click as a couple, and they don't fare much better as individuals.

Streep is so edgy and jittery that we can't believe she actually is employed in a fine-arts auction gallery where she handles precious and delicate objects. And Schneider's character does nothing to disprove folk wisdom that says certificates and diplomas have nothing to do with common sense.

Every time he makes a move, he puts himself in jeopardy. You can't expect an audience to sympathize with characters who are just plain dumb, and that's the way the psychiatrist is in "Still of the Night." If there is a dark, dangerous and isolated place, trust him to find it.

THIS FOOLHARDINESS extends to walking through Central Park at night. Now that's stretching things beyond all credibility. Even foreign tourists know enough to avoid the park at night.

The only minimally interesting aspect of the character is his relationship with his mother (Jessica Tandy), also a psychiatrist. They get together and chat about dreams. He gives one interpretation, she another.

The other worthy part of the film is the inside look it gives us of the operations of a major auction house, probably modeled after Sotheby-Park Bernet. Now if the characters were of some interest, I'd make a bid for this movie. As it is, I can only admire Benton's expertise in creating suspense out of such thin stuff.



Roy Scheider plays the victim's psychiatrist, a man singularly lacking in common sense. He seems to take every opportunity to needlessly expose himself to danger — such as taking a midnight stroll through some of New York City's more dimly lit streets.



She's a he
Dustin Hoffman (right) stars as Michael Dorsey, a dedicated actor with a reputation for being difficult who finally lands a steady job on a soap opera by masquerading as a woman in "Tootsie." Sidney Pollack, the film's producer, plays George Fields (left). Dorsey's high-powered New York agent.

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