

One of Martin Scorsese's best films often neglected

By Oliver Spivey
Staff Writer

Martin Scorsese's primary language is the cinema, Period. Few directors are endowed with his understanding of movie history and fewer still possess such an encyclopedic memory of films old and new from around the world.

One moment his own films can evoke the directorial flourishes of Hitchcock, the next moment Ford, perhaps Fellini and even an obscure name like Allan Dwan.

Far from being a merely derivative director (as is the case with more than a few in Hollywood), Scorsese has perfected his renowned cinematic style—often marked by fascinating visual ideas, pop oriented sound tracks, and uncompromising bursts of violence—by directing a handful of modern classics that include things like *Mean Streets* (1973), *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Raging Bull* (1980), *Goodfellas* (1990) and *The Departed* (2006).

Though his name is synonymous with the crime film, let's not forget his expert jaunts into the realms of historical drama with *The Age of Innocence* (1993) and *Gangs of New York* (2002), historical biography with *The Aviator* (2004) and musical documentary with things like *No Direction Home* (2005) and *Shine a Light* (2008).

Lost within this diverse and celebrated body of work is one of

Scorsese's best, though lesser known films; one that critics and fans alike often forget to include in their discussions: a tense, darkly funny thriller titled *After Hours* (1985).

It's about one madcap, nightmarish night in the life of a jaded word processor named Paul Hackett (Griffin Dunne), whose innocent flirtation with a quirky young girl named Marcy (Rosanna Arquette), sets in motion a chain of absurd events.

Unique

The movie is quite unlike anything Scorsese has done before or since. It ultimately seems to become an exercise in style that ratchets the viewer up into a bundle of nerves and anxiety—and what a job it does.

Watching it recently with a friend, he looked at me midway through and said, "This movie is frustrating!" He was right. That's apparently Scorsese's intention, to frustrate the viewer and allow almost no relief, driving home Hitchcock's point about playing your audience like a piano.

Camera work

The movie plays like a cross between a Franz Kafka novel and an episode of "The Twilight Zone," if that gives you any idea of the film's bizarre, alienated tone. Hackett's misfortune and paranoia on the darkened streets of SoHo are visually underscored by cinematographer Michael Ballhaus's fluid camera work.

His camera freely pans around rooms bring-



ing a sense of disorientation and Scorsese has him go in consistently for close-ups, which usually signify a moment of importance or sudden

insight, only to reject the viewer's expectation of a payoff.

Coincidences

One strange coinci-

dence and occurrence brings about another and so on. By agreeing to go visit Marcy that night, and accepting the keys to her apartment (the keys are

dropped to him from her window in a now famous "falling" POV shot), Hackett crosses into a nightmarish underworld—a veritable Hades, as expressed by Scorsese's favorite motif of hellish steam rising from sewer manholes.

Is it all just mere coincidence? Or are the gods toying with our hero? Hackett's situation echoes the observation made by the ill-fated protagonist Al Roberts, in the film noir classic *Detour* (1945): "Someday fate or some mysterious force can put the finger on you or me for no reason at all."

Humorous

The film is not without its own brand of humor: We get Cheech and Chong as two thieves, Teri Garr as an airheaded waitress stuck in the 1960s and an ice cream truck loaded with a ruthless mob out for Hackett's blood.

Kudos to screenwriter Joseph Minion who at that time wrote *After Hours* while still in film school.

Taken at face value

Yes, *Raging Bull* and *Taxi Driver* are greater achievements and of more importance to movie history. But *After Hours* is a film that doesn't try to be more than it is and takes its audience for a wild ride while never taking itself too seriously.

Every great artist should be given the chance to just doodle a little. If that means we get gems like this one, then by all means, Mr. Scorsese, keep on doodlin'.

Classic movie is best Agatha Christie adaptation

By Oliver Spivey
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What do 10 upscale characters, a mansion on a secluded island and a series of ghastly murders all have in common? They are all mystery yarn trappings straight from the imagination of Agatha Christie.

Her novels and plays have been adapted into excellent film versions through the years.

Billy Wilder's first-class adaptation of *Witness for the Prosecution* (1957) and Sidney Lumet's colorful *Murder on the Orient Express* (1974) are most notable.

The late Robert Altman even gave us a wonderful parody of Christie-like mysteries with *Gosford Park* (2001).

Director René Clair's *And Then There Were None* (1945) is one classy keep-you-guessing movie experience based on Christie's famous whodunit, *Ten Little Indians*, and is easily the best film adaptation of that novel.

The 10 guests are summoned to the remote island via invitation. Upon arriving, they gather in the mansion's drawing room where they hear a mysterious recording of their unknown host's voice on the record player.

The voice lets them know why they were

brought to the island: all of them, in one way or another, have gotten away with a murder in the past and faced no punishment.

Their host wants to make sure they get what's coming to them before their stay on the island is up.

With no eyewitnesses or police to interfere, the guests will receive chilling justice at the hands of their mystery host.

One by one the guests start dying off, while each begins harboring suspicions and making false accusations, fearful of who among them may be the culprit.

Those of you familiar with this famous story already know what the outcome will be, but since many of you have never seen or read it, I will reveal nothing further about the plot—it is something to savor on your own.

I must admit that the film had me genuinely fooled at times; if you watch closely enough, use process of elimination and look for clues, you may be able to figure out who the killer is before the big twist of the film's final reel.

And Then There Were None is an exquisite movie with a great ensemble cast, innovative cinematography and chic direction. Barry Fitzgerald, Louis

Hayward and the incomparable Walter Huston—director John Huston's father—are standouts, although the entire cast shines.

June Duprez may give the only ho-hum performance in the show, but she by no means lessens any aspect of this marvelous production.

The film still plays strong, with its suspense not really diminishing much in the last 64 years.

This polished English whodunit finds its American genre equivalent in detective/mystery classics of the Depression era—films like *The Thin Man* (1934) and *The Kennel Murder Case* (1933).

But by the time of this film's release in the mid '40s, the urbane detectives and criminals of those films were being replaced by the hard-boiled ones that walked the shadowy, vice-filled streets of film noir.

If you're a moviegoer who must have brain-bruising action, lightning paced cutting and monosyllabic drivel masquerading as dialogue in order to enjoy a movie, then this is not your ticket.

But if you prefer impeccably penned verbal wit, the right amount of tongue-in-cheek humor and finely executed sequences of suspense, then look no further.

