Paul Lynch's
Prom Night

The following words, for those of you with a healthy distrust of journalism, have not been lifted out of context or warped in any way. They were meant to mean what they seem to mean.

"To do horror, you have to be a craftsman, not an artist. I'm the kind of guy who writes what people suggest. I'm a hired writer... Prom Night was Paul's idea, his package. He had the idea and I wrote the lines."

(Bill Gray, Toronto Star, Sept. 18, 1980)

"After making two human dramas that failed at the box office, I was left dying in the gutters of Toronto... One has to go for the market as it is. Prom Night is the Procter & Gamble method of making movies. I think it's a terrific marketing concept."

(Paul Lynch, in conversation)

"It's my first chance to 'play pretty.'"

(Jamie Lee Curtis, the Prom Night press kit)

OK, so Prom Night is pure product, created for the twin purposes of cash-in-hand and career advancement. That isn't, and shouldn't be, taken as grounds for derision. A lot of the world's best movies have been made in the commercial spirit — think of Hitchcock. But, being product, it must be considered in the same way as any other product: Does it work? Does it do what horror movies are supposed to do?

At their best, and it doesn't happen often, horror movies provide an empathic understanding of the subterranean twistings and pain of the soul, or an alternate, darker view of the human condition. Mostly, though, they're supposed to provide a lot of suspense and shocks.

Prom Night begins with four children playing "Killer," a slightly sadistic version of Hide and Seek, in an empty building. Outside, another girl passes by with her younger brother and sister. She goes off, younger sister goes inside to join the game, younger brother is left standing, fearful, outside.

Inside, the girl is caught and terrorized by the players. She falls to her death through a window and the players run away, vowing eternal silence.

Seven years later, the day of the prom dawns and each of the four gets an obscene, threatening phone call reminding them of the death. All four attend the same high school, along with Kim (Jamie Lee Curtis), the dead girl's older sister. During the day, Nick (Casey Stevens), one of the four, transfers his affections from Wendy-the-Bitch (Eddie Benton), another of the four, to Kim. While they rehearse to be crowned king and queen of the prom, the Bitch and the Bully, suspended for groping Kim and punching Nick, plot to wreck the party.

Meanwhile, the cops are worried. The sexfiend who took the fall for the original death has escaped and is headed this way. They decide to put a couple of men on the prom.

The day proceeds, couples make dates and discuss sex. The prom begins and people slip away to have sex. They are stabbed by a masked lurker. Three of the four original players are killed, including the Bitch. The Bully sneaks backstage, to temporarily dispose of Nick. Then, as he stands in the shadows, waiting to appear as a self-crowned prom king, the killer, thinking him Nick, chops off his head.

Nick frees himself and fights with the killer, who drops his axe. Kim picks it up and brains him. He staggers outside to collapse and be unmasked.

It's a familiar plot, and the Murderous Masked Maniac is a familiar genre that has worked, more or less effectively, in numerous films from Psycho to Halloween. But it doesn't work here. It doesn't work because Prom Night is so badly crafted. Which is curious, given what Bill Gray said in the quote at the beginning, and because Paul Lynch, when he isn't talking about how the movie was aimed specifically at the 15 to 22-year-olds, is talking about how proud he is of the craftsmanship that went into Prom Night.

Maybe Lynch has a point, maybe he's talking about technical crafts, the nuts and bolts of getting an image on celluloid. On that level, Prom Night is well-crafted and some of that craft enhances the viewing. The decision to hold the final fight under a strobe light makes the scene far more interesting than it would otherwise have been. And director of photography Robert New does some interesting shooting through smeared and dirty broken glass, creating a very miasmatic, effective atmosphere.

It is here where the craftsmanship must
Prom Night


Andrew Dowler