George Kaczender’s Agency

In his books, *Subliminal Seduction* and *Media Sexploitation*, journalism professor and media watchdog Wilson Bryan Key has postulated the theory that the mass media, and especially advertising, uses subliminal messages — those which are received only at the subconscious level — in a manner which poses a serious social threat. Obviously, there is ample material in this concept for a solid thriller of a movie. Agency, unfortunately, is not that movie.

Like *Suzanne*, this Robert Lantos Stephen Roth production, directed by George Kaczender (*In Praise of Older Women*), is plagued by an inability to follow up a strong beginning. The theme of subliminal seduction is introduced in the very first shot of the film, in which a standard pan up the outside of an office building is intercut by momentary shots of a demonic figure. Then there is a cut to a frenetic, dimly lit disco number (the only time when Lewis Furey’s sardonic music is properly used), in which the demonic also figures. The dance number turns out to be a deodorant commercial, that is, being watched by the head of the advertising agency of Quinn, Porter and Stripe. The final segment of this sequence shows the firm’s enigmatic boss, Ted Quinn (Robert Mitchum), pronouncing the gar­ish, incomprehensible ad, “perfect.”

But after this display of derring-do, and a flashy animated title sequence, Agency begins to plod its predictable way. We meet Phillip Morgan (Lee Majors), and his doctor girlfriend Brenda Wilcox (Valerie Perrine), by way of an irrelevant scene of him jogging through the streets of a wintry New York that looks suspiciously like Montreal. Morgan is upset that Quinn, who has recently become a power in the advertising business in spite of his lack of experience in the field, has been replacing staff. He has also been institu­ting new campaigns, without consulting Morgan — who is, after all, Q.P. & S.’s creative department head.

Morgan’s suspicions of Quinn grow, when his friend, Sam Goldstein, who has been pestering him with tales of sinister matters such as characterization go by the board very early, only Saul Rubinek — as the frenetic Goldstein — really tries to achieve anything beyond the barest caricature. Lee Majors seems to have been cast in the lead for his name — how fast time flies — for the part requires someone who can appear thoughtful and reflective, hardly Majors’ strong suits as an actor. Valerie Perrine has demonstrated, in *The Magician of Lublin* and *Can’t Stop The Music*, that she can rise above some pretty low material; but even she has no chance to make anything of her part. For all that she is required to do, Alexandra Stewart, who plays Quinn’s

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chief lieutenant, might as well have mailed in her performance. Perhaps she did.

Except for Michael Kingbell's cat Maria, and former Canadian cabinet minister Pierre Sevigny, who plays Quinn's anonymous Air Force bigwig boss (neither have any lines), the only actor in Agency to emerge with any dignity is Robert Mitchum. His heavy-lidded casual style has enabled him to survive his fair share of turkeys — like the 1978 version of The Big Sleep. Here, that style works in his favour amidst the sound and the fury signifying nothing. Mitchum is enough of a professional to hide the contempt he probably felt for the project. Still, nothing he can do explains why such a sharp operator as Quinn would hire as his hitmen the two coke-snorting morons (Quinn's own description) played with grade A ham by Gary Reineke, looking jaundiced, and Michael Kirby, looking ill.

What condemns Agency to its low-calibre fate as a film (its Canadian identity is not even an issue), is that the producers and director overlooked, in their cynicism, one crucial matter. In order for a story of conspiracy and paranoia to work, there must be some kind of ethical structure inherent in the organization under scrutiny. And the nominal hero has to be sympathetically portrayed — good examples being The Hospital, Three Days of The Condor, All The President's Men, Network, Coma and ...And Justice For All to varying degrees. Although it is possible to make a thriller without such ethics, or a sympathetic hero — as in Francis Coppola's The Conversation — there is no indication that the makers of Agency believe enough in what they are saying to succeed. Nor do they possess the necessary wit and energy to convincingly fake it.

Paul Costabile

One of Those Nights

Witty, fast-paced and unpretentious, One of Those Nights is a breath of fresh air from the genre of films about dance. Much of the credit for this little gem should go to Gina Lori Reilly, who choreographed and performed the dance, entitled "Sleeper," that is the subject of this film. Performed to quick-tempo '30's and '40's jazz, this most unusual dance uses a bed as a dance floor. Reilly dances under the covers, on top of the bed, beside the bed and, of course, ends up by falling asleep, as the sun peeks up over the horizon, on the floor beside the bed.

The filmmakers, John Brooke and John Fremes, should be commended for the style with which they have presented this solo dance performance: a solo human performance requires a very delicate treatment on film, or else the strength of the film medium will overpower it. The filmmakers utilized an imaginative array of camera angles, covering the action from directly overhead to camera-on-the-floor and everything in between — but, primarily, with well-designed static frames. The style of shooting, coupled with the clean, crisp editing has allowed the movement and humour of the performance to translate onto the screen.

One of Those Nights is proof of what can be done when a small budget is combined with a thoughtful approach and a little imagination. Hopefully, this film will open a few doors for these young filmmakers, so we can see more of their ideas on the screen.

Edward Farrar