

REVIEWS

Eric Till's Improper Channels

It's the type of line the makers of *Improper Channels* think funny. As pandemonium breaks loose during the film's chaotic finale, the self-serving bureaucrat berates his associate, the meddling social worker: "I've been in social service nine years and never helped anyone... and I'm proud of it... if you want to help mankind, why don't you become a prostitute."

Har-har-har.

That gives you a good idea of the level of humour, taste, and intelligence in *Improper Channels*. A comedy about a married couple battling the red tape of modern bureaucracy, it attempts to present superficial escapist entertainment within the context of a relevant social issue. The two approaches are incompatible, because the filmmakers have no genuine commitment to the film's social aspect. The pertinent theme of a family, victimized by technology and human folly, becomes a trivialized vehicle for antic humour.

As the Martleys - a trendy suburban couple with a shaky but salvageable marriage, who put aside their differences after an interfering social worker unjustly takes away their daughter - Alan Arkin and Mariette Hartley work with material that is occasionally fresh, but predominantly bland. They win the audience's sympathy by default, as the film constructs a simplistic world of good guys and bad guys. The good guys are the Martleys, the bad guys everybody else, starting with social worker Gloria Washburn - a naive bleeding heart - and her ruthless superior, Harold Cleavish. Basing its comedy on the premise that bureaucratic workers are either stupid, insensitive, or corrupt, the film quickly overworks this theme. With an indolent clerk, surly secretary, or distracted switchboard operator at every turn, it never gets past a juvenile perspective.

It's hard to tell which takes precedence in the screenplay, the plot episodes or the worked-in string of gags and one-liners. The scene where Arkin brings his daughter to the hospital (right out of *Kramer vs. Kramer*), lacks any sense of urgency or danger because of the music's insipid quality. What should have been a tense dramatic moment becomes a tranquillized stroll into the emergency ward - just a little screen business to set up some hospital gags.

Much of the film's humour functions at a level of offensive but unindictable sexual and racial innuendo. Why is Gloria Washburn, obese, saccharine-toned, and incompetent, such an unflattering portrait of a working woman? Why does the equally unappealing Harold Cleavish constantly drop hints of sexual aberration? Isn't the telephone gag with the Indian lab technician guilty



● In trying to win back her daughter (Sarah Stevens) Mariette Hartley becomes the victim of bureaucratic bungling photo: Pirooska Mihalka

of an implied cultural bias? Such humour reinforces the audience's existing stereotypes and prejudices for cheap laughter.

The film's habit of borrowing glib, topical references from social issues in an attempt to add relevance ultimately defeats itself. For example, we see the exasperated orphanage matron bribe the Martley's daughter with a candy bar, and we realize she has no authority with the children. This follows the film's premise that chaos reigns in all social institutions. After the daughter and another child escape from the orphanage, they are found late at night by a motorcycle patrolman, who takes them to the Martley house. Arkin ironically endures the cop's harangue for his apparent carelessness, since he can't tell him the real situation. The cop is black, and really giving it to Arkin, and it's not hard to figure out why: Atlanta. We are reminded of the danger young children face alone on city streets. So later, back at the orphanage, as the matron bribes the other children for escape information with a pepperoni pizza, her lack of control inspires more anxiety than laughter.

Yet a response of anxiety to such pap seems ludicrous, and the viewer is perplexed by the contradiction. The film's narrative shifts between the realistic and the ridiculous without ever properly establishing the point of view. Such an approach insidiously demands that the film be accepted entirely on its own

terms. If the viewers question what's going on, with their own intelligence and judgement, invariably they are disappointed with the film's lack of depth.

What can be said about director Eric Till's work? At rare moments, as when the doctor tells Mrs. Martley he wants to keep her healthy daughter in the hospital overnight, he captures the situation's ironic complexity with chilling honesty. Framed in a tight, softly lit close-up, the doctor is the image of calm reassurance and trust, while really he is buying time for the social worker to abduct the child in the morning. However, such a cutting picture of deceit is only an intimation of what the film might have been, and Till's work lacks, in a word, heart. He seems uninterested or unable to pursue his subject seriously.

This film's bottom line is its inherent cynicism. In the true spirit of Hollywood North, *Improper Channels* appears to have been conceived as a business venture, with little consideration given to the honesty of its approach. But worse, through its pandering, low-level humour and the disproportionate pessimism of its assumptions, it manipulates the cynicism of the audience. It's ironic that a film which purports to depict the horrors of bureaucracy represents, through its formulaized, sterile, and alienating approach, the worst qualities of a bureaucratized filmmaking system.

Bruce Malloch ●

IMPROPER CHANNELS. d. Eric Till
exec. p. Jon Slan p. Alfred Pariser, Morrie Ruvinsky
assoc. p. Michael Burns asst. p. Robert Sax a.d.
Bill Corcoran (1st), David Earl (2nd), Bruce Moriarty
(2nd), Shirley McCreight (3rd) d.o.p. Anthony Rich-
mond, B.S.C. p. man. Barbara Laffey loc. man.
Phyllis Wilson art. d. Ninkey Dalton, Charles Dun-
lop, Nancy Pankiw (asst.) ward. Sharon Purdy
(mistress), Arthur Rowsell (asst.), Gage Gardiner
(asst.), Lorraine Carson (asst.), John Roberts (asst.)
make-up Shonagh Jabour, Kathleen Mifsud (asst.)
hair Judi Cooper-Sealy props. Andrew Deskin
(master), Peter Fletcher (asst.) set dress. Angelo
Stea, Enrico Campana (asst.), Gareth Wilson (asst.)
p.a./set dress. Tony Bennett ed. Thom Noble, Ian
McBride (asst.), Joan Chapman (2nd asst.) cont.
Diane Parsons sd. rec. Henri Blondeau boom
Normand Mercier trainee d. George Reisenauer
focus puller Carl Harvey clapper loader John
Hobson cam. dept. trainee Lynnie Johnston gaf.
Greg Daniels best boy Adam Swica gen. op.
Morgan Carpenter elec. Frank Merino, Ian Foulds
key grip Jim Craig 2nd key grip Danny Narduzzi
3rd key grip Brian Daniels driver capt. Nick
Scheffer drivers Joe Bohonos, John Ellis, Calvin
Greenwood, Harro Bauer coffee person Rita
Johnson casting Karnick & Armstrong, Peter
Lavender (extras) graphics Gary Myers p. sec.
Judy Watt p. acct. Dorothy Precious bookkeeper
Carol Rothel p. acct. Deborah Bohonos p. sec.
Karen Boulton, Vicki Sleeper legal/admin. Philip
Johnston exec. asst. Steven Jonas stills Marnie
Grossman pub. Stephenson, Ramsay, O'Donnell
Ltd. unit pub. Glenda Roy L.p. Alan Arkin, Mariette
Hartley, Sarah Stevens, Danny Higan, Monica
Parker, Harry Ditson, Richard Farrell, Martin Yan,
Leslie Yeo, Tony Rosato, Ruth Springford, Lynne
Griffin, Paul-Emile Frappier, Stephanie Shoulds,
Brenda Radford, Dave Thomas, Katherine O'Hara,
Florence Carrenza, George Touliatos, Eugene Levy,
Ted Turner, Jane Mallett, Linda Very, Shawn Braslis,
Al Maini p.c. Paragon Motion Pictures (1979) dist.
Saguenay Films running time 91 min.