**RE VIEWS**

**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 prada?"

Har-har-har.

That gives you a good idea of the level of humour, taste, and intelligence in *Improper Channels*, which follows a married couple battling the red tape of modern bureaucracy. It attempts to present superficial escapist entertainment within the confines of a provincial social issue. The two approaches are incompatible, because the filmmakers have no genuine commitment to the film's social subject matter. The story 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 bureaucrats are either stupid, insensitive, or corrupt, the film quickly overworks this theme. With an indolent clerk, slyly secretary, or distracted switchboard operator at every turn, it never gets past a juvenile perspective.

It's hard to tell what 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 becomes a fractionized switchboard operator at every turn, 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 formulization, sterile, and alienating approach, the worst qualities of a bureaucratized filmmaking system.

Bruce Malloch

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**IMPROPER CHANNELS**

- **d.** Eric Till
- **e.s.** p. Jan Sila, Algood Fisher, Marielle Rivkin, Gaspari
- **p.** Michael Burrow (asst), p. Robert Sex (acc)
- **s.** Bill Cueracan (1st), David Earl (2nd), Bruce Mortarty (3rd), Shirley McCleary
- **m.** Anthony Rich-
- **r.** Phyllis Williams, arcs. D. Ninkey Dalton, Charles Dunlop, Nancy Pankiw (asst. ward. Sharon Purdy. (mistress), Arthur Rossell (asst). Gay Gardner (asst), Lorraine Caron, (asst), John Roberts (asst)
- **k.** make-up Shonagh Joubert, Kathleen McCall (asst)
- **l.** hair. Jodi Cooper Sealy. props. Anson Gaskin (master), Peter Fletcher (asst) set dress. Angela Stoa, Enrico Campagna (asst), Gary Wilson (asst)
- **a.** p. and sound. Tony Bennett ed. Thana Noble, Ian MacRae (asst), Joan Chapman (2nd asst)