



● There's no dignity from George Segal and no scope for Irene Cara when the neighbours get together

## Max Fischer's The Man From 5A

This is not going to be another *cri de coeur* about the follies of the Canadian film production system. It is accepted as a given that the various professional persons whom producer Claude Leger got to put up the money for *The Man in 5A* – not quite enough money, as regular readers will recall – were purely mercenary in their motivation. What is at issue is why Max Fischer has chosen to follow up *The Lucky Star* with this picture, an embarrassment of high degree.

Laird Koenig's 1978 novel, "The Neighbor", upon which this film is based, has been used before. Louis Malle's *Atlantic City* also started here, but John Guare jettisoned Koenig's plot to such a degree that it was credited as an original rather than an adapted screenplay. Fischer and his co-writer Leila Basen have adhered to the novel with very little deviation, which, as shall be seen, only proves how wise Guare was to depart from it.

Jimmy Skinner (George Segal) is the title character, a retired theatrical prop man who lives alone with his white dog

Moon – inherited from someone else – on the fifth floor of a Greenwich Village apartment house. Jimmy is embittered and angry at everyone and everything – the crumbling city, the mailman who hasn't delivered his social security cheque, the surly, suspicious neighbors, and most of all the four "goddamn kids and their goddamn music" who live across the hall.

Jane Gans (Irene Cara), her boyfriend Michael Moran (Clark Johnson), their partner Susan (Barbara Cook) and Clifford (Nicholas Campbell), their hustling, would-be manager, are celebrating the minor success of their band. There's an undercurrent of menace, as Clifford and Michael have just had a major fight, and both Susan and Clifford are high on PCP. When Jimmy's dog, attracted by the smell of steaks on the grill, happens to wander in, Clifford casually feeds him some of the Angel Dust. A few minutes later, the frenzied Moon attacks Jimmy and drops dead.

Pushed to the edge, Jimmy confronts the mocking Clifford, and in the ensuing struggle knifes him. Jimmy cleans up all traces of his involvement, including the dead dog, and Michael is later arrested for the murder. Jane determines to find the real killer, and is led into a cat and mouse relationship with Jimmy, who is suddenly rich from the money he took off Clifford's body.

What we have here is a typical pulp thriller in the manner of Cornell Woolrich, full of rather unlikeable amoral

characters. That in itself is not the primary reason that the film does not work. Nor can Max Fischer and Leila Basen take the blame alone.

Laird Koenig's work has never translated well into film. *The Children Are Watching*, a potentially intriguing tale of the effects of television violence, was made in France in 1978 as a minor Alain Delon vehicle. *The Little Girl Who Lives Down The Lane*, filmed in Canada and released in 1977, was so unimaginatively directed that only Jodie Foster's acting (perhaps the best of her teen years) made it worthwhile. Koenig's own scripts for *Bloodline* and *Inchon* are major disasters.

Fischer, however, has to be held responsible for the flat, uninspired look of the film. The director has no feel for the atmosphere of New York City, and the fact that most of it was shot in Montreal is no excuse. Nor does he try to give any explanation as to the obvious inconsistencies in the story. Why, for example, if Jimmy is so totally poor, is he living in that apartment in that part of town? And, if he was, in his day, "the best prop man on Broadway", why has he no pension from any of the theatre unions?

Fischer must also take the blame for the reprehensible casting of George Segal, replacing the originally slated Peter O'Toole, in the role of Jimmy. Aside from the fact that Segal is much too young, with the result that he is made up as if he just got off a tour of

*Fiddler on the Roof*, he has no feel for the role, the kind of dignity and hidden ruthlessness that Burt Lancaster showed in his treatment of the character. Ideally, Jimmy called for someone like George Burns or Burgess Meredith, an actor who could project the dejection and anger of the neglected elderly. Segal doesn't seem to care.

It was perhaps natural, after having played ambitious young singers in *Sparkle* and *Fame*, that Irene Cara would be interested in the role of Jane. But Fischer gives her nothing to do. There is no chemistry between her and Segal, and Art Phillips' anemic songs offer her no scope for her talents. What there is has been badly edited, and much of Clark Johnson's part as Michael, including a big ballad number with Cara, has been left on the floor. Incredibly, a duet between Cara and the tin-eared Segal is included with excruciating effect. Nicholas Campbell received a Genie nomination for his slimy Clifford, for no discernable reason.

In the last analysis, *The Man in 5A* fails because Max Fischer, unlike Louis Malle in *Atlantic City*, really seems to have no interest in the story of the characters that he is able to communicate. What sympathy the audience might have for Jimmy is destroyed by Segal's sleepy performance, and Irene Cara's character is not developed enough to compensate. The struggle the filmmakers had to make the film, which must be acknowledged, just doesn't seem worth it. And nothing is more disheartening than that.

J. Louis Costabile ●

**THE MAN IN 5A** d. Max Fischer d. asst. Suzanne Fischer 1st a.d. Pierre Magny sc. Leila Basen, Max Fischer cont. Marie La Haye p. man. Francine Forest compt. Micheline Bonin p. sec. Jacqueline Wanner art d. Anne Pritchard art dept. coord. Barbara Shrier d.o.p. François Protat sd. Patrick Rousseau cost. des. François Laplante make-up Marie-Angèle Protat hair Gaetan Noisieux **NEW YORK CREW 2nd a.d.** Roger Pugliese trainee Ann Egbert intern. Richard Schlessinger p. man. Pete Runfola asst. to p. Diane Foti p. coord. Sarah Carson art. d. Misha Petrow set dec. Daniel Von Blomberg prop master John K. Wright cam. op. Don Sweeney 1st asst. cam. Don Biller sd. mix. Michael Tromer key grip Edwin Quinn grip Tom Gilligan. William Kerwick gaffer Richard Quilan elec. Ray Fortune. Charles Meere, Francis Brady. Mike Proscia Jr. generator Vincent Brady cost. des. Edna Hart. Ruth Morley (consult.) ward. superv. Jennifer Nichols ward. asst. Eddie Brenner make-up Joe Cranzano hair Phil Lito transp. capt. Harry Leavey drivers James Sweeney. William Buckman Sr., Chester Malinowski prod. asst. Alan Steinfeld **MONTREAL CREW 2nd a.d.** Marie Therberge 3rd a.d. Martha Laing unit ma. Michelle St-Arnaud cast. dir. Arden Rysphan art design Charles Dunlop art dept. adm. Tina Boden prod. asst. Roger Dufresne set dec. Serge Bureau asst. dec. Denis Hamel const. Harold Trasher. Normand Sarrazin head carp. Bruce Jackson. Claude Simard sp. efx. John Meighen props master Jacques Chamberland props Vincent Fournier 1st asst. cam. Yves Drapeau 2nd asst. cam. Michel Girard boom Thierry Hoffman key grip Serge Grenier stills Takashi Seida ward. Louise Jobin ward. dresser Diane Paquet prod. asst. Michele Forest. Christian Bernard p.r. Monique Mallet-Leger (514) 288-6251 p. Claude Leger p. asst. Anne Burke p.c. Neighbour Films Inc. (1981). L.p. George Segal, Irene Cara, Nicholas Campbell, Clark Johnson, Barbara Cook, Joyce Gordon, Andy Martin Thomson, Laura Harrington, Bob Lawrence, Terry Hellis, Peter Wise, Emidio R. Michetti, Antonia Ray, Charlotte Jones, Matt Craven, Arleigh Peterson, Tony Sherwood, Chris Russo, Joel Kramer, Polly Magaro, George Harris, George E. Zeeman, Ernesto Gasco, Evan Hollister Mirand, Norris Domingue, Pierre Lalonde, Irene Kessler, Gloria Irizarry, Roland Nicheri, Johnny O'Neil, John Aichinger, Steven Lanke, Paul Bedard, Jose Santos, Michael Dymia, Frank Antonson, Harold Holden, Jean Thivierge, Ingrid Vanderwater, Evere Ferguson, Robert Spivak, Kevin Brownie, David Samain, Francis Lamer, Ada Fuoco, Charles Manuel, Marty Star, Ben Lawson, Christine Reamus, Deepak Mandand, Jacqueline Williams, Robert Jezek, Lynn Griffith. Colour 35mm, dist. Citadel running time: 90 mins.