

David Cronenberg's
Dead Ringers

Once again, as they did with *The Fly*, the hordes have rushed into print to proclaim *Dead Ringers* a masterpiece. And once again, as with *The Fly*, I get to stand on the sidelines, think for longer than most of my colleagues are allowed, and proclaim it isn't a masterpiece. It's got problems and weaknesses all over the place.

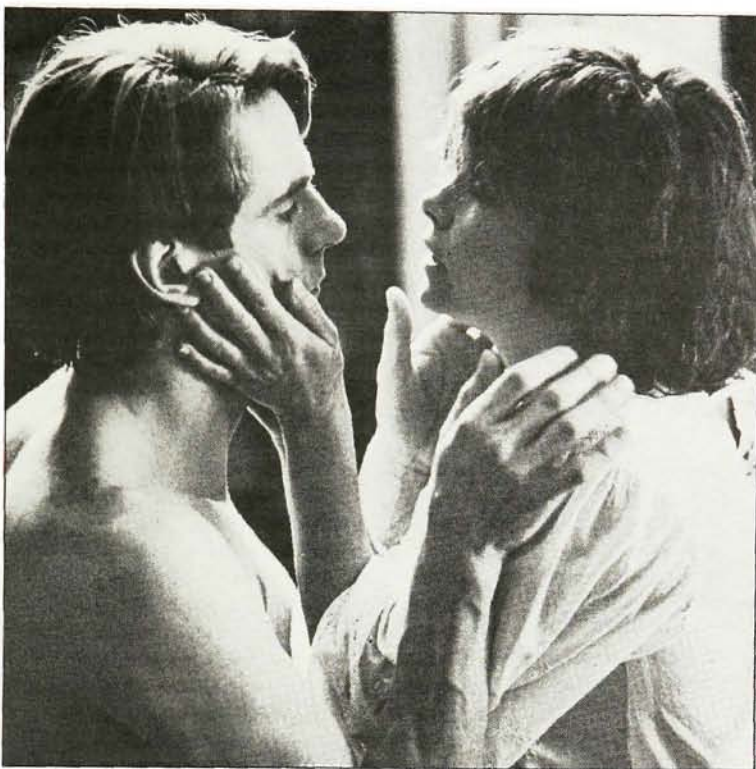
It's still a terrific movie, though, far better than most. Jeremy Irons is as good as acting gets. He not only clearly differentiates twin gynaecologists Elliot and Beverly Mantle, he takes each through a wide emotional range with full depth and character consistency. Playing against himself he develops such rapport and rhythm that it's easy to forget the impressive technical feat and simply become absorbed in the characters.

More than Irons, it's got sequences as good as any ever put on film – Beverly's eyes-averted shuffle past his brother's corpse as he whimpers Elliot's name again and again in anguished denial – the sex scene with Claire Niveau that's once hot, repellent, comic and so vivid you can smell the sheets – others, too.

But underlying and uniting everything is *Dead Ringers*'s greatest strength and the source of its major failings – its mood. The sense of decay and inescapable doom begins with the unbelievably ominous credits. Antique-looking woodcuts of surgical instruments and gynaecological anatomy float over black and blood-red, accompanied by Howard Shore's supremely eloquent dirge. Cronenberg builds from there with gliding camera, claustrophobic framing, somber pacing and sets impeccably dressed and designed to point up the Mantle brothers' antiseptic lives and spectacular decay.

To sustain the funereal mood, Cronenberg has resorted to a strategy of absences. After the credits, Shore's dirge doesn't return until well into the second half, leaving the movie largely music-free, which makes the music phenomenally effective when it does arrive, allowing Cronenberg to further darken an already-lightless atmosphere.

There are virtually no exteriors, only the opening sequence and a couple of transition shots framed as tight as possible. This, too, works well, giving immense force to the shot, third or fourth from the end, when Beverly, his brother slaughtered, leaves his office building and walks across a bit of grass to make a phone call, only to abandon the effort and return to his waiting death. It's the first time anybody has stepped away from a building into the sunlight, the first time extras move freely in the frame, the film's only sweeping diagonal movement. In one shot, it's everything Beverly tries for and, in trying, loses. It's a great shot, I only wish it were longer.



Jeremy Irons as Dr. Beverly Mantle falls in love with Claire Niveau (Geneviève Bujold) in *Dead Ringers*

There are virtually no characters but the Mantles. Though Geneviève Bujold turns in a fine, full-fleshed performance every bit as absorbing as Irons', kinky, pill-popping actress Claire Niveau is little more than a plot device, a catalyst to activate the flaw in the Mantles' shared identity. Though we can see why she prefers Beverly to Elliott, who's a thorough cad, we're left to our own guesses about why she cares at all. Elliott says she's neurotic, but he's a liar with no feeling for anybody but his brother, so why should we believe him? Except for the pills she doesn't seem neurotic – kinky sex in my books is indication of an active imagination, though Cronenberg may well disagree. At any rate, Claire Niveau is ultimately so unimportant to the movie that she isn't even given a payoff.

The lack of characters is a weakness, but it does serve to keep our attention on the Mantles and, taken all together, the mood-creating elements do fully prepare us to give the Mantles all the pity and terror they deserve when they finally decide, in madness, that surgical separation is their only salvation.

But the success of mood comes at the cost of other important elements, among them pacing. The montage sequence – Elliott ransacks their apartment for Beverly's stashed dope – is cut so slowly it loses its effect. Beverly's dream – Claire bites through the ligament that, in fantasy, binds him to Elliott – is too abrupt. In both cases it feels as if Cronenberg feared – needlessly – that his mood couldn't stand the strain.

The absence of other characters leads to a lack of definition in the film's social setting – the

world of medicine. We know that what little identity the brothers possess is as doctors, medical inventors, researchers, clinicians and we know they've risen to the heights of their profession to receive awards, grants and prestigious teaching positions. But we don't see how they're regarded as people, whether they're liked and accepted, or regarded with distaste as the *sui generis* freaks Cronenberg paints them as (he doesn't even allow them parents).

Without something – some character or sequence – to locate the Mantles with, or against, other doctors, the gynaecological background loses much of its potential to enrich the drama. We see the casual drug use, the dehumanization of the patient, the monstrous ego, the authoritarian attitude and the hypocritical cant surrounding it all. But we see it all as Mantle brothers behaviour and they're weird from the word go, 11-year-old freaks, as we first see them, who want to have sex in the bathtub with a neighbour girl as "an experiment" and who, when rejected, retreat to "operating" on a Living Woman anatomical doll. He's making the point that these guys are naturals for careers in surgery – but are they the only kind who are?

The Mantles' status as twins, not doctors, is at the core of their tragedy. Their shared temperament leads them into gynaecology, but their twin-ness, the fact that together they function better than either could alone, makes them a success. It is their attempt to move beyond twin-ness, when Beverly falls in love with Claire and tries for a separate life, that

destroys them, their status as doctors only provides the specific shape of their tragedy.

But how one views Western medicine profoundly affects how one views the tragedy and, without a view explicit in the film, we're left on our own. Personally, I think Western medicine is a good thing, far from perfect, but good. So I see their fall as real. You might take from other Cronenberg films, particularly *Shivers*, *Rabid*, *The Brood* and *Scanners*, the view that doctors are at best irresponsible and at worst dangerous egomaniacs and conclude that *Dead Ringers* offers the same view. What does this do to the tragedy?

You may not see it as tragedy at all. Some feminist writers – check out the works of Deirdre English and Barbara Ehrenreich, particularly *Witches, Midwives & Nurses* – have pointed to gynaecology as a male usurpation of an essentially female job, as a key element in the overall dehumanization of women. It's a reasonable view, but if it's your view, you're not likely to give a flying fuck about the Mantle brothers. No tragedy, no emotional involvement, just a couple of severely diminished assholes getting what they deserve.

They are diminished. Beverly can't get laid under his own identity, panics at Claire's lightest probing of his emotional life, cares about nothing but medicine. Elliott cares for glamour and womanizing, that's all. Emotional shallowness in him appears not as fear but as coldness. They're both struggling with limitations that, in one sense, most of us have long ago overcome, but that, in another sense, as twins, most of us will never face. I find them tragic and fascinating anyway. You may not. Either way, the thread of common humanity is slender and better use of their social setting might have worked to strengthen it.

In the film's middle section, mood exacts its heavy price from action and plot. Claire discovers she's been fucking both brothers and walks out. That kills the suspense of waiting for Elliott to do something drastic to keep his brother. Then Beverly gets loaded and depressed. Claire returns. Beverly gets loaded and depressed. Claire leaves. Beverly – loaded and depressed – returns to Elliott, who starts him on a rehab program, which fails, so he starts another one. Claire returns. Beverly – loaded and depressed – goes to her, then returns to Elliott for the final showdown. By which time you feel like you've been in the theatre for hours.

Part of that feeling comes from the plot repetition combining with the dirge tempo. Cronenberg keeps the scenes as edgy as he can and he does it well. But it still isn't enough to overcome the inertia.

To make matters worse, we're teased with glimpses of much more interesting material that's forever being shoved aside to give us yet another look at Beverly's progress into drug psychosis. You see, he develops this truly warped delusion: he thinks the women he's

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treating are all mutants. We think this is going to lift things into a whole new dimension. We remember those cruel surgical instruments from the credits and we know Beverly's an inventor. We know Claire is herself a sort of mutant - a "trifurcate", three cervical openings, hitherto unknown - and we suspect this may be the source of Beverly's interest in her. We're primed for something seriously bizarre.

We don't get it. We start with a scene of Beverly abusing a terrified, yet docile, patient. But only later do we learn that he saw her as a mutant. So, as it plays, the scene is one more look at the course of Beverly's drug problem.

And let's digress from that scene to the question of women in Cronenberg's movies: does he hate and fear 'em, or what? More than once I've both read and heard the argument that Claire Niveau is the bad guy here, that she disrupts their perfect boys-club lives and brings the Mantles to ruin. This is a view that requires ignoring the blatant evidence that the boys were a mess before they ever heard of her, that Beverly got his tendency to addiction on his own. If Cronenberg hates and fears women, he isn't exacting a celluloid revenge here - Claire, potential victim of brotherly rage and madness throughout, isn't killed, isn't mutilated or assaulted - and neither is any other woman. Rich in opportunities to slaughter many, *Dead Ringers*, in fact, slaughters none.

Women take a variety of roles in Cronenberg movies, but when they spread evil, that evil has invariably been put into them by a male scientist - check *Shivers*, *Rabid*, *The Brood* and *Videodrome*. Hell strikes indiscriminately in the Cronenberg universe, taking men and women both as agents and victims, but its source is always male science. Beverly, terrorizing his patient, certainly offers gut-level fear to women viewers, but the scene itself is less about women's fear of gynaecologists than the reverse.

Anyway, next time we get anything more than a little dialogue about Beverly's delusion, we're watching him, in a rather flat scene, persuade an artist to make working prototypes of his designs for surgical instruments for operating on mutant women. The idea is shocking, but the drawings only glimpsed. Nor have we seen what manner of soul-threatening mutations he's hallucinated - admittedly a near-impossible sight to get onto commercial screens. We haven't seen his sketches of the mutants, nor his doubtless fevered designing of the instruments. It's all handled as quietly as possible.

We wait for the instruments and they're worth it - strange and beautiful, brutal and loathsome. Beverly, ritually garbed in blood red, brings them into the unnaturally dark operating theatre. He's going to use them. Their unveiling and the subsequent build-up make a classic suspense sequence, but the moment Beverly strikes, everything dissolves into unintentional comedy as he flings himself atop the patient to grab her anaesthetic mask and babble, "I need



Geneviève Bujold, playing Claire Niveau, in *Dead Ringers*

something to slow me down." It's Hunter S. Thompson time and we're right back staring at Beverly's drug psychosis.

We wait for the instruments to be brought to Claire, convinced that her fate and the Mantles' are intertwined. But when they're brought, Beverly just tells her they're for separating Siamese twins and rushes out to slaughter his brother. That's it for Claire and that's it for surgical instruments - except Beverly does use them, in no very interesting or explicit way, on Elliot.

With potential to do so much more, surgical instruments for operating on mutant women are confined to standing as a visual correlative to Beverly's mental decay, a function already perfectly well served by the gold-plated Mantle Retractor that he first invents, then misuses and destroys. They make no significant connections of mutants, love, Claire and the Mantles.

Despite its shortfalls, *Dead Ringers* is, as noted, a terrific, original movie that shows Cronenberg's growth as an artist. The work with actors, camera and cutting continues the growth so prominent in *The Fly*. The familiar themes, not much developed since *Videodrome*, receive new treatment, new focus - the scientist examined rather than the consequences of scientific folly; the body's decay and war with the mind seen as springing from an internal, emotional state rather than being imposed from outside.

Yet *Dead Ringers* also shows Cronenberg shrinking - restraining, almost neglecting his unique, most developed power. The man is known throughout the world for his complex and original visual imagination, for his ability to infuse his fantastic creations with solid, real-world meaning. Why did he create such powerful images - mutant women and surgical instruments - and then so lightly use them? Why use them at all when they so disrupt the flow? Or were they, once thought of, too tempting to abandon?

It is, of course, no part of the artist's job to cling only to the tried and true. Experimentation promotes growth and David Cronenberg particularly deserves the chance to keep on growing.

Nor is it any part of the reviewer's job to deal with the motives and mind of the artist - trust the tale, not the teller, is our credo. But a couple of lines from *Dead Ringers'* press kit may do much to explain why the movie is the way it is and why, despite being this way, it is hailed as a masterpiece.

The kit quotes Cronenberg as calling the film, "much more naturalistic," and "not a horror movie." Co-writer Norman Snider adds, "This, on the other hand, really deals with some of the horror of life. People can't dismiss it as a mere fairytale."

As literal truth, these statements are

ludicrous. There is scarcely a naturalistic frame or line of dialogue in the film, a condition found in all of Cronenberg's best work. A mood of horror pervades the work and horror films, however fantastic, can and do deal with the horror of life - check *The Brood* on child abuse, *Videodrome* on cultural conditioning via TV. And any boob capable of dismissing something as "a mere fairytale," is equally capable of dismissing something as "a mere movie."

As cultural imperatives though, they're dead on the mark. We are generally trained to value "naturalistic" mimetic fiction over fantastic fiction. At the same time, we're trained to suppress our imaginations so that fantastic fiction becomes harder to derive meaning from. No wonder, then, that a "naturalistic" Cronenberg movie draws highest praise and no wonder that Cronenberg, here committed to naturalism, steps so hard on his instincts.

But he has those instincts. He has that imagination and *Dead Ringers* offers further proof that when he unleashes it, together with his fully-developed talent, he will, indeed, produce a masterpiece.

Andrew Dowler •

DEAD RINGERS exec p. Carol Baum, Sylvio Tabet p. David Cronenberg, Marc Boyman d. David Cronenberg sc. David Cronenberg, Norman Snider based on "Twins" by Bari Wood, Jack Geasland assoc. p. John Board d.o.p. Peter Suschitzky ed. Ronald Sanders p. des. Carol Spier cost. des. Denise Cronenberg mus. Howard Shore casting Deirdre Bowen p. man/post-prod. sup. Gabriella Martinelli 1st a.d. John Board 2nd a.d. Izadore K. Musallam 3rd a.d. Laurie Mirsky a.d. trainee Cyndie Clayton sup. art. d. Alicia Keywan art d. James McAteer 1st asst. art d. Peter Grundy, Vlasta Svobda, Gregory Keene asst. art d. Ken Watkins art dept. trainees Rocco Matteo, Yasna Stesanovic, Alexandra Thompson loc. man. Lillian Sarafinchan set dec. Elinor Rose Galbraith set dressers Clive Thomas, Chris Dutton loc. sd. Bryan Day boom op. Michael Lacroix sc. sup. Dug Roistein opt. fx. sup. Lee Wilson sp. fx. des. Gordon Smith lab sup. Derek Howard mech. des. Walter Klassen artist Don McLeod 1st asst. cam. Marvin Midwicki 2nd asst. cam. Arthur E. Cooper cam. trainees Marjio Corcoran, Andres Trauttmansdorff motion ctrl. programmer Randal Balsmeyer motion ctrl. asst. Richard Palin steadicam op. Robert Crone, CSC assoc. ed. Steve Weslak sd. ed. Wayne Griffin, David Evans, Richard Cadger, David Giammarco mus. ed. Suzana Peric makeup artist Shonagh Jabour hair Juy Duboisson p. coord. Alice Ferrier assts. Sandra Tucker, Lesley Clark, Jami Abell, Janet West opt. dir. George Furniotis, G. John Furniotis opt. printer Jon Campfens, Dimitris Anapliotis opt. lineup Chris Furniotis, Bob Yoshioka rotoscope artists Alan Peppiatt, Don Snowdon animation stand Peter Gruza gaffer Scotty Allan best boy Ian Scott generator ops. Duane Gullison, Roger Bowden key grip John Zulinski, Michael Iwan, Don Payne vid. sup. David Woods unit publ. Prudence Emery, Jeremy Podewas stills photog. Attila Dory rad. surg. inst. 2 Gorillas, Standing Metal Works orchestration Homer Denison studio sculptures Ted Hunter l.p. Jeremy Irons, Geneviève Bujold, Heidi Von Palleske, Barbara Gordon, Shirley Douglas, Stephen Lack, Nick Nichols, Lynn Cormack, Damir Andrei, Miriam Newhouse, David Hughes, Richard Farrell, Warren Davis, Jonathan Haley, Nicholas Haley, Marsha Moreau, Denis Akiyama, Dee McAfferty, Susan Markle, Murray Cruchley, Jane Luk, Tita Trevisan, Jacqueline Hennessy, Jillian Hennessy, David Walden, Liliane Stillwell, Bob Bainborough, Nick Rice, Joe Matheson, Hadley Kay, Cynthia Eastman, Nora Colpman, Rena Polley, Madeline Atkinson, John Bayliss, Graham Evans. An Astral Films release.

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