

FILM REVIEWS



Basking in the limelight before horror steals the show are **Prom Night's** king (Casey Stevens) and queen (Jamie Lee Curtis)

Paul Lynch's **Prom Night**

The following words, for those of you with a healthy distrust of journalism, have not been lifted out of context or warped in any way. They were meant to mean what they seem to mean.

*"To do horror, you have to be a craftsman, not an artist. I'm the kind of guy who writes what people suggest. I'm a hired writer... **Prom Night** was Paul's idea, his package. He had the idea and I wrote the lines."*

(Bill Gray, **Toronto Star**,
Sept. 18, 1980)

*"After making two human dramas that failed at the box office, I was left dying in the gutters of Toronto... One has to go for the market as it is. **Prom Night** is the Procter & Gamble method of making movies. I think it's a terrific marketing concept."*

(Paul Lynch, in conversation)

"It's my first chance to 'play pretty'."

(Jamie Lee Curtis, the
Prom Night press kit)

OK, so **Prom Night** is pure product, created for the twin purposes of cash-in-hand and career advancement. That isn't, and shouldn't be, taken as grounds for derision. A lot of the world's best movies have been made in the commercial spirit — think of Hitchcock. But, being product, it must be considered in the same way as any other product: Does it work? Does it do what horror movies are supposed to do?

At their best, and it doesn't happen often, horror movies provide an empathic understanding of the subterranean twistings and pain of the soul, or an alternate, darker view of the human condition. Mostly, though, they're supposed to provide a lot of suspense and shocks.

Prom Night begins with four children playing "Killer," a slightly sadistic version of Hide and Seek, in an empty building. Outside, another girl passes by with her younger brother and sister. She goes off, younger sister goes inside to join the game, younger brother is left standing, fearful, outside.

Inside, the girl is caught and terrorized by the players. She falls to her death through a window and the players run away, vowing eternal silence.

Seven years later, the day of the prom dawns and each of the four gets an obscene, threatening phone call remind-

ing them of the death. All four attend the same high school, along with Kim (Jamie Lee Curtis), the dead girl's older sister. During the day, Nick (Casey Stevens), one of the four, transfers his affections from Wendy-the-Bitch (Eddie Benton), another of the four, to Kim. While they rehearse to be crowned king and queen of the prom, the Bitch and the Bully, suspended for groping Kim and punching Nick, plot to wreck the party.

Meanwhile, the cops are worried. The sexfiend who took the fall for the original death has escaped and is headed this way. They decide to put a couple of men on the prom.

The day proceeds, couples make dates and discuss sex. The prom begins and people slip away to have sex. They are stabbed by a masked lurker. Three of the four original players are killed, including the Bitch. The Bully sneaks backstage, to temporarily dispose of Nick. Then, as he stands in the shadows, waiting to appear as a self-crowned prom king, the killer, thinking him Nick, chops off his head.

Nick frees himself and fights with the killer, who drops his axe. Kim picks it up and brains him. He staggers outside to collapse and be unmasked.

It's a familiar plot, and the Murderous Masked Maniac is a familiar genre that has worked, more or less effectively, in numerous films from **Psycho** to **Halloween**. But it doesn't work here. It doesn't work because **Prom Night** is so badly crafted. Which is curious, given what Bill Gray said in the quote at the beginning, and because Paul Lynch, when he isn't talking about how the movie was aimed specifically at the 15 to 22-year-olds, is talking about how proud he is of the craftsmanship that went into **Prom Night**.

Maybe Lynch has a point, maybe he's talking about technical crafts, the nuts and bolts of getting an image on celluloid. On that level, **Prom Night** is well-crafted and some of that craft enhances the viewing. The decision to hold the final fight under a strobe light makes the scene far more interesting than it would otherwise have been. And director of photography Robert New does some interesting shooting through smeared and dirty broken glass, creating a very miasmatic, effective atmosphere.

It is here where the craftsmanship must

make it, or break it. Those early "glass" shots tie to the first death: the girl falls through a dirty window to land on broken glass. Later, the killer uses shards of glass on his first victims. Then, the "glass" idea is dropped, never to be seen again, as the killer picks up an axe to do his later work.

Now, a glass motif may be a small thing, of interest only to cinema fanatics and the terminally bored, but consider the killer poised with his axe. That axe has very specific work to do: it must knock the head clean off the Bully so it can go rolling down the aisle at just the right moment. No wonder they abandoned the glass. But, if they couldn't make it pay off, why didn't they scratch it from the script altogether?

Or consider the fact that it's the Bully getting his head chopped off, instead of Nick, the hero. We've known for about an hour that something horrible is going to come down that aisle — thanks to a big, big hint dropped early in the film — just when every kid at the prom is expecting the king and queen. And the large, obvious subplot about the prom's impending ruination has already been fully established. So what is the final outcome? The subplot has allowed the filmmakers to substitute a bad guy at the last moment. That way they can have their Grand Guignol scene without killing the hero.

Then there's the other subplot: the one about the escaped maniac whom everybody thinks has killed the girl. Everybody but the audience. The killer's identity is laid out so clearly in the opening sequence that anybody capable of peeling his own bananas knows, without even thinking, who's under that mask.

Not that it matters who's under the mask; for when you look back on the film, you realize that the killer's character was so blandly written that nothing in it even hints at a homicidal nature. This they try to make up for with a song over the end titles that's supposed to explain his inner pain — a song you can't hear for everybody leaving. This is craftsmanship?

Is it craftsmanship to design a heroine who contributes nothing to the development of the action, who is never the target of the menace, and who is blind to everything unusual happening until the last ten minutes? Something similar happens in **The Changeling**, another Bill Gray script. Although the George C. Scott character knows what's happening, and even helps it to happen, he has no part in the climax when it comes; he's merely an accidentally-endangered bystander.

Is it craftsmanship to cast Jamie Lee Curtis, with her almost supernatural stillness and haunted eyes, as a nice girl, and then make her seem even odder by surrounding her with arm-waving rubber-faces?

In a film with a useless, uninteresting heroine and pointless subplots, which relies solely on that masked maniac to amuse its audience, is it craftsmanship to delay the villain's entrance for well over an hour? And finally, when he does get to do his stuff, is it craftsmanship to undermine his effectiveness as a figure of terror by making him a bit of a klutz? Norman Bates in **Psycho** can get away with being a little klutzy, because it adds to his humanity. **Prom Night's** killer has no humanity to be added to, so his slippings and stumblings only destroy any chance

of his achieving the quality of the super-efficient, unstoppable killer of **Halloween**.

By the time the killer enters, his effectiveness or lack of it is a moot point. Any excitement in the murder scenes, which is where Lynch and company lavish all their care, is greeted with the same response usually reserved for a whole Cherry in a MacDonald's cherry turnover, "Oh wow, a cherry! Must've been an accident."


So **Prom Night** is a turkey; but right now, that matters no more than do these irate grumbings, because **Prom Night** is making money. Lots of it. (Check the figures for yourself.) But I doubt if it will be making money a year from now. **Psycho** is still raking it in; so are **Night of the Living Dead**, **The Texas Chainsaw Massacre**, **Carrie** and **Halloween**, all films with marked similarities to **Prom Night**. And marked differences. There's a moral here for filmmakers who would be comforted by residual cheques in their old ages: if you're going to give it to them, give it to them good!

Andrew Dowler

Prom Night

d. Paul Lynch p. Peter Simpson assoc. p. Richard Simpson sc. William Gray story Robert Guza Jr. or. mus. Carl Zittler, Paul Zaza d.o.p. Robert New p. man. Daniel Nyberg ed. Brian Ravok cfe exec. in charge p. Deanne Judson 1st a.d. Steve Wright asst. p. man. Maggie McMeekin loc. man. Aine (Onya) Furey cont. Sarah Grahame 2nd a.d. Lee Knippelberg 3rd a.d. Martha Hendricks driver capt./p.a. Don Baldassarra p. sec. Jody Morden p. acct. Stan David asst. to p. Linda Moyle d.(2nd unit) Dan Nyberg, Steve Wright film ed. Brian Ravok cfe, Ian McBride (asst.), Joan Giammarco (asst.), Bill Carter (asst.) sd. ed. Bruce Nyznik (superv.), Robin Leigh, Tony Currie (asst.) re.rec. Gary Bourgeois art d. Reuben Freed (pre-prod.) make-up Kathleen Mifsud hair Jenny Arbour ward. Kathleen Moyer, Constance Buck (asst.) key props. Marmie Charndoff asst. props Linda McClelland key set dress. Jo-Anne Chorney, Robin Collyer constr. man. Mark Molin carpenter Alan Sharpe story bd. Dave Ross focus puller Greg Farrow clapper loader

Marvin Midwicki gaf. Bob Gallant best boy Freider Hochheim key grip Carlo Compana asst. grip Dennis Thompson cam. (2nd unit) Henri Fiks cam. op. Robert Fresco focus puller Barry Stone clapper loader Christophe Bonnière sd. rec. Brian Day, Tom Mather (asst.) sp. efx. Al Cotter prosthetics Warren Keillor stunt co-ord. Terry Martin stunts Terry Martin, Randy Kamula, Karen Pike, Dwayne McLean or. disco musc. Paul Zaza l.p. Leslie Nielsen, Jamie Lee Curtis, Casey Stevens, Eddie Benton, Antoinette Bower, Michael Tough, Robert Silverman, Pita Oliver, David Mucci, Jeff Wincott, Marybeth Rubins, George Touliatos, Melanie Morse MacQuarrie, David Gardner, Joy Thompson, Sheldon Rybowski, Rob Garrison, David Bolt, Beth Amos, Sonia Zimmer, Sylvia Martin, Liz Stalker-Mason, Pam Henry, Ardon Bess, Lee Wildgen l.p. (children) Brock Simpson, Debbie Greenfield, Tammy Bourne, Dean Bosacki, Leslie Scott, Karen Forbes, Joyce Kite casting Karen Hazzard (Toronto), Sheila Manning (L.A.) pub. Elizabeth Blomme p.c. A Simcom Production (1979) col. 35mm running time 91 min. dist. Astral Films (Canada), Avco Embassy Pictures Corp. (U.S.A.)



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