

Donning the costume of each of his victims, **Terror Train's** crazed killer means business

## Roger Spottiswoode's **Terror Train**

One of the most memorable sketches in the checkered history of *Saturday Night Live* was Anthony Perkins' commercial for "The Norman Bates School of Motel Management," with its multiple-choice questions designed to test one's fitness for a career in motel work: "If an attractive female guest loses the key to her room, should you a) Give her the spare key b) Let her in with the pass key c) Hack her to death with a kitchen knife."

If only we had known then that option (c) would become a whole sub-genre of the horror film, one that we could name after the daughter of the woman Norman Bates hacked to death with a kitchen knife twenty long years ago.

**Terror Train** is the latest example of the Jamie Lee Curtis film. Structurally, the Jamie Lee Curtis film works this way. 1) A deranged killer returns to either avenge a wrong or continue an interrupted killing spree. 2) He begins to track and kill a group of young people, generally women, whom he associates with his compulsion. 3) No one is left but the heroine, who pluckily but clumsily fights

off his depredations until she either kills him or is rescued by an aging character actor.

We can name this genre after the singularly sullen Miss Curtis because she has starred in three of them, including the genre's classic, **Halloween**. The leading character, however, can be played high-budget (Faye Dunaway in **Eyes of Laura Mars**), low-budget (Olivia Hussey in **Black Christmas**), or no-budget (Caitlin

O'Heaney in **He Knows You're Alone**). Elements of the genre, an odd mating of **Psycho** with **And Then There Were None**, turn up all over the place, including **Murder By Death**, **The Omen**, **The Brood**, **Dirty Harry**, etc., but certain elements remain consistent. The killer is usually nameless and faceless, the events take place in isolation — as on the train in **Terror Train**, in the deserted small town of **Halloween** or in the sorority house during the holidays in **Black Christmas** — and the heroine is unfailingly an attractive young woman who is pursued through strange dark places (lest we forget, Jane Austen parodied that little number in *Northanger Abbey*, published in 1803).

Thus, when I planted myself, fully equipped with popcorn, coke and notepad, for a screening of **Terror Train**, I was prepared for minimal plot, bad acting, and at least forty minutes of gliding subjective camera work — a now-tired element of cinematic grammar that should have been retired the day John Carpenter wrapped **Halloween**: In other words, I was ready to screen a film like **Prom Night**, or **He Knows You're Alone** (an MGM release that not only cops most of **Halloween**, but plagiarizes **The Silent Partner's** most electrifying *frisson*, the severed head in the aquarium).

Fortunately, **Terror Train** is much better than that. Not great, but acceptable. Director Roger Spottiswoode, previously known for his editorial work for Peckinpah, Walter Hill and Karel Reisz, has avoided the stylistic cliché by having the camera stay still, a remarkable decision

### Terror Train

d. Roger Spottiswoode p. Harold Greenberg sc. T.Y. Drake exec.p. Harold Greenberg and Lamar Card mus. comp. John Mills-Cockell d.o.p. John Alcott p. design. Glenn Bydwell ed. Anne Henderson, Susan Shanks (asst.) p. exec. Don Carmody dialog. co-ord. Caryl Wickman art d. Guy Comtois cam. op. James Devis cost. design. Penny Hadfield p. man. William Zborowsky cont. Brigitte Germain a.d. Ray Sager (1st), David Macleod (2nd), Blair Roth (3rd) focus puller Paul Gravel gaf. Lou Bogue clapper loader Jonathan Goodwill stills Alan Carruthers addit. ph. René Verzier, Al Smith, Peter Benison prop. mas. Maurice Leblanc, Jean-Pierre Laurendeau (asst.) set dress. Jenepher Hooper ward. Susan Hall asst. to p. design. Rosanne Moss seamstress Lise Pharand casting Ingrid Fischer, Anna St. Johns sd. mix. Bo Harwood boom Jean-Marc Magnan re-rec. mix. Dave Appleby, Dino Pigat sd. eff. ed. Fred Brennan, Michael O'Farrell dialog. ed. Sharon Lackie, Ellen Adams mus. ed. Kirk Hawkes asst. sd. ed. Helen Watson

Michael Rea unit co-ord. Ginette Hardyp. sec. Kathy Flynn train co-ord. Paul Wisenthal loc. man. Paul Lamontagne, François Leclerc (asst.) asst. to p. Victoria Barney exec. p. asst. Louis Massicotte p. acct. Lucie Drolet, Paule Clark (asst.) p.a. Sandy Rochester make-up Joan Isaacson, Michele Burke, Louise Mignault Rundel (asst.) spec. make-up consult. Alan Friedman hair Huguette Roy best boy Normand Foy elec. Yves Tessier key grip Don Caulfield, Pierre Lapointe (asst.) grip Jerome South spec. eff. Josef Elsner draftsman Raymond Larose trainee Marie-Renée Collette driver capt. Michel Siry drivers Michael Bernardelli, Donna Noonan, Vicki Frodsham, Roy Perryon, Steve Wilkins l.p. Ben Johnson, Jamie Lee Curtis, Hart Bochner, David Cooperfield, Derek Mackinnon, Sandee Currie, Timothy Webber, Anthony Sherwood, Howard Busgang, Steve Michaels, Greg Swanson, D.D. Winters, Joy Boushel, Victor Knight, Don Lamoureux, Charles Biddles, Sr., Elizabeth Cholette, Thomas Haverstock, Peter Feingold, Richard Weinstein, John Busby, Roland Nincheri, Andrea Kenyon, Elaine Lakeman, Gerald Eastman, Charles Biddles, Jr., Nadia Rona p.c. Triple T Productions (Astral) Ltd. 1979 running time 96 min. dist. Astral Films Ltd.

when you consider the possibilities offered by all those corridors. Perhaps they were using a camera too large to negotiate the space, or maybe director of photography John Alcott was still suffering from motion sickness after all the vertiginous, swooping movement in his last film, *The Shining*.

The story is pretty simple, despite a couple of truly bizarre plot twists. In their first year at college, the sweethearts of Sigma Phi played a rather gruesome sexual joke on a fellow freshman. Now, at their graduation party aboard an excursion train, the conspirators who planned the joke begin to be murdered by someone lurking on the train. Is it the Mephistophelean magician (a type-cast David Copperfield), or is he yet another red-herring in a plot that reeks of that fish.

While the film is well-shot and exceptionally edited (by Anne Henderson), the acting is nothing special. Ben Johnson, as the conductor, is himself, and thus is pleasant. Jamie Lee Curtis, the Hollywood child with her mother's eyes and her father's jaw, is again allowed to exploit her marked ability to scream. Hart Bochner (son of Lloyd) reprises his smirking big-man-on-campus role from *Breaking Away*, but seldom seems intelligent enough to play an incipient medical student.

*Terror Train* is certainly a well-packaged little thriller, and, given its saturated advertising budget, it will probably make a bundle for the boys at Astral. But it is really yet another example of the bareness of a genre's cupboard. Aside from *Halloween*, an extraordinarily rigorous and controlled formal exercise in point-of-view, none of the best horror films of recent years have had anything to do with the "hack'em to death with the kitchen knife" school of sadism. Rather, they have dealt with the body's rebellion against repression (Cronenberg's films), portrayed the imminent detonation of the nuclear family at ground zero (*Carrie*, *The Shining*), or attempted to project a legitimately surreal, dream-state (*Phantasm*).

*Terror Train* is, to use that most damning of critical phrases, "good of its kind." What is truly unfortunate is that this kind of genre gives us thrills by promising the brutal murder of defenseless young women. (Note Robin Wood's comments on *Psycho*'s shower scene as surrogate rape.) It is a dead-end genre, which possesses neither honour nor value, and offers little possibility for growth.

John G. Harkness

## Paule Baillargeon/ Frédérique Collin's *La cuisine rouge*

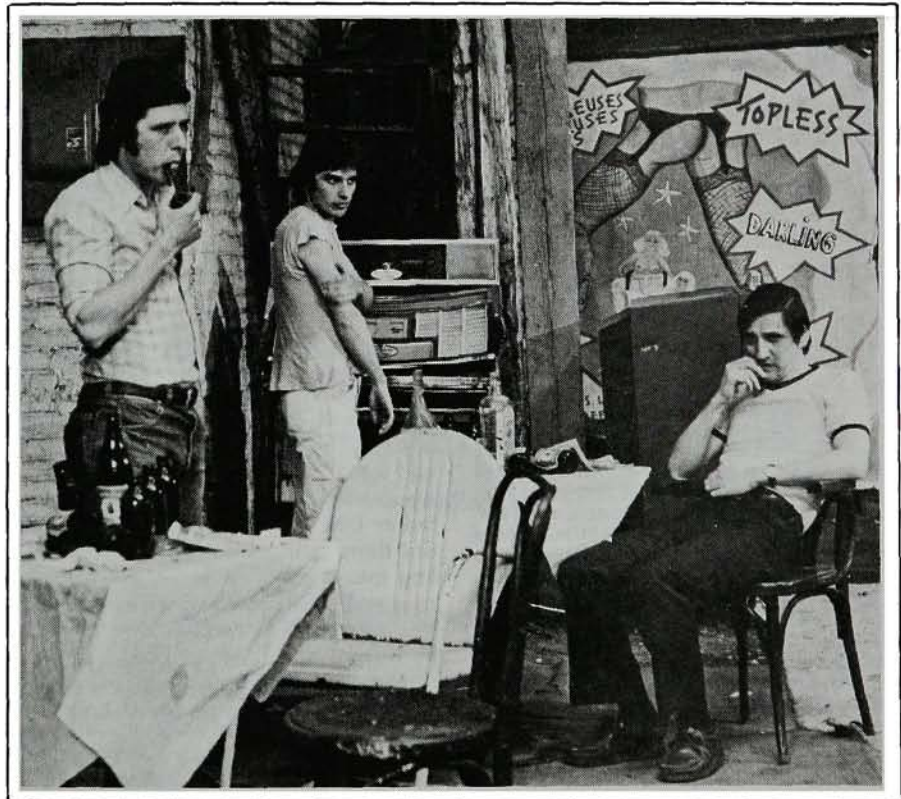
Plot, character development, dramatic tension and other devices which usually give film viewers something on which to hang their hats are all missing from this avant-garde Quebec film, whose technical adequacy is not enough to redeem it as a valid cinematographic product.

*La cuisine rouge* is meant to depict the social anarchy which has set in since women have become aware of their oppression. However, rather than dramatize the experience of one or two individuals, the film has chosen to represent collectively the many faces of woman — in all her anguish and contradictions — in this era of transition to who-knows-what. However, for a number of reasons, it fails to engage our emotions and comes off more as an abstract political tract than anything else.

The film opens in a rather deceptive traditional manner. A young couple has just tied the knot at Montreal's Palais de Justice and is on its way, with the bride's parents to her place of work where the wedding reception is to take place. They unload at an unlikely spot — a rather seedy bar-cum-strip joint, only to find the remains of the previous night's business untouched. In short, a mess, and nowhere any sight of imminent festivities.

The bride repairs hastily to the kitchen, where she finds her colleagues in a state of emotional disarray equal to the physical disarray of the premises: having refused to carry out their usual duties, they find themselves totally at loose ends. What ensues is an essentially plotless, tedious acting out of their confusion. The scene switches occasionally from kitchen to back yard, to bar, where a group of men, disoriented by the women's rebellion, eventually "examine" their own positions in a series of incredibly simplistic harangues reminiscent of sometime-Godard.

The trouble with all this delirium — rendered with minimal camera move-



Hardly enthusiastic about the imminent wedding reception are *La cuisine rouge*'s Pierre Curzi (left), Bertrand Carrière and Jean-Pierre Saulnier

photo: Camille Maheux