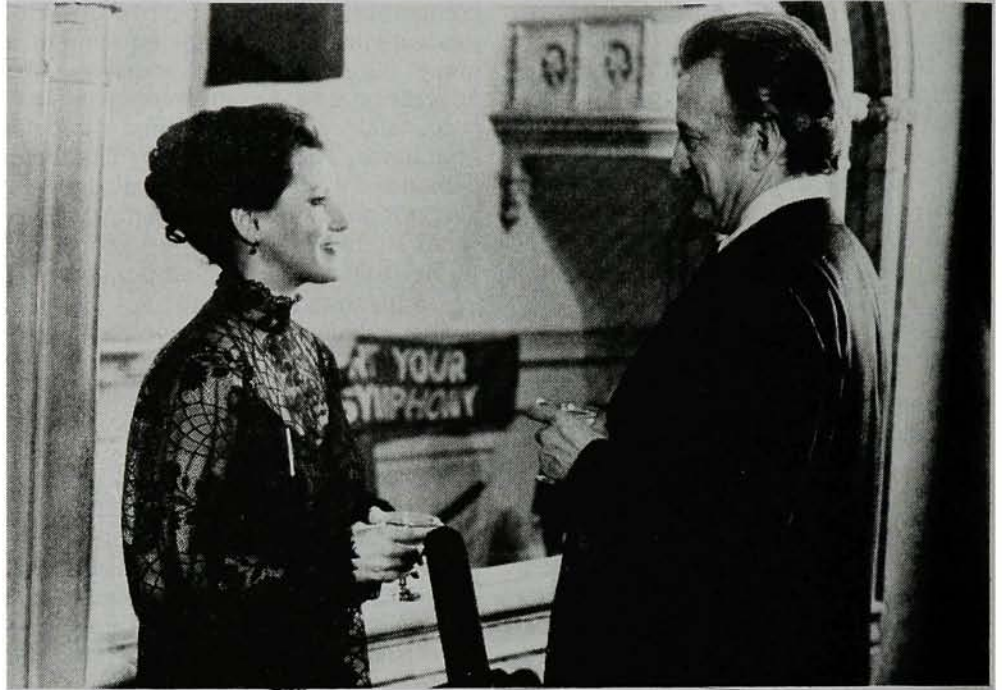


FILM REVIEWS

Peter Medak's The Changeling

p.c. Chessman Palk Productions Ltd. p. Joel B. Michaels, Garth H. Drabinsky assist. to p. Christine Pittel p. co-ord. Susanne Lore p. man. James Margellos, George Margellos (assist.) loc. man. Rondi Johnson p. sec. Catherine Howard p. assistants Frederick Frame, Wayne McLaughlin, Kimberley Richardson, Tom Braidwood loc. auditor James R. Westwell account. Heather McIntosh, Sandra Palmer (assist.) d. Peter Medak a.d. Irby Smith (1st.), Fiona Jackson (2nd) screenplay William Gray, Diana Maddox story Russell Hunter props. John Berger, J. Hipman Chow (assist.) art d. Reuben Freed scenic artist James Woods set dec. Keith Pepper, Steven Shewchuck (assist.) d.ph. John Coquillon cam. op. James R. Connell cam. assist. Thom Ryan (1st), Benton Spencer (2nd) sd. mix James Pilcher boom Herb Heritage original mus. Rick Wilkins mus. arrange. Kenneth Wannberg mus. box theme Howard Blake ed. Lilla Pederson, Doris Dyck (assist.) ward. Kerry Holmes, Maureen Hiscox, Anthony Scarano cost. design. Roberta Weiner make-up Delbert Acevedo, sma; Ken Brooke, Linda Brown hair Roberto Fernandez, Renate Leuschner, Salli Bailey gaf. Frank Heeney, David Anderson best boys Art Collier, Rick Allen grip Alan White, Ron Gillham, John Scott, Frederick Ransom, Paul Abram, Frederick Wharton stills Philip Hersee special effects Gene Grigg (co-ord.), Michael Clifford, Barry Madden, William Orr (assist.s) stunt co-ord. Max Kleven cast. Nancy Isaak (Vancouver), B.C.I. Casting (N.Y. & L.A.), Canadian Casting Associates (Toronto) l.p. George C. Scott, Trish Van Devere, Melvyn Douglas, Jean Marsh, John Colicos, James B. Douglas, Madeleine Thornton-Sherwood, Roberta Maxwell, Bernard Behrens, Frances Hyland, Ruth Springford, Barry Morse, Eric Christmas, Helen Burns, Chris Gampel, Janne Mortil, Louis Zorich cont. Patti Robertson pub. Lynda Friendly, First Performance Public Relations col. 35mm length 107 min. year 1979 dist. Pan-Canadian Film Distributors (Can.), Associated Film Distribution — an I.T.C. company (U.S.A.).



Claire Norman (Trish Van Devere) exchanging pleasantries with composer John Russell (George C. Scott) in *The Changeling*

loses his wife (Jean Marsh, in what might be the briefest star-billing performance on record), and his daughter in a car accident in upstate New York. In his grief, he accepts a teaching post in Seattle where he soon meets a woman called Claire Norman (Trish Van Devere).

Given that a prerequisite of this genre is an audience's agreement that it will suspend a considerable amount of disbelief, there are moments in this story where granting permission for a pre-frontal lobotomy might be more in order. One such moment occurs when Van Devere, who works for the local historical society, finds Scott a house — a neglected old mansion of utterly staggering enormity and magnificence. We must accept that he lives in it completely alone.

As might be expected, the house is possessed; and it isn't long before its ghostly and somewhat familiar repertoire of messages begins, with Scott being awakened one morning by a loud metallic pounding. (This same sound was last heard in the 1963 film, *The Haunting*.)

Later, the sound of a window smashing at the top of the house leads him to a hidden attic room filled with the dusty

effects of a young child, including a small wheelchair, and a music box which, astonishingly, plays the same melody, note for note, that Scott composed the day before.

Van Devere is soon drawn into the mystery, and when presented with the bizarre evidence of the music box, responds with perfect poise and utter calm, stating, "It's a startling coincidence."

This prompted the first sniggering from cynics in the audience, who apparently were not suspending disbelief quite far enough to accept such a blindly incongruous understatement.

To check out the house's history, Scott goes to the Historical Society, where Van Devere's superior, Minnie Huxley (played by Ruth Springford, in a role lying somewhere between a Nazi Commandant and the innkeeper's wife in a *Dracula* movie) states, "That house is not fit to live in. It doesn't want people." Such creaky and unnecessary lines serve little purpose but to generate unwanted giggles and cause an audience to pull even further back from their disbelief agreement.

For some unfathomable reason, Scott chooses not to question Huxley any further, even though she appears to know a

Amidst the general state of apprehension about the quality of last year's film crop, Garth Drabinsky's and Joel Michael's gothic-suspense picture, *The Changeling*, seems to be such a ray of hope that it has caused considerable rejoicing. The film is, without doubt, the classiest-looking imitation of an American film ever shot in Canada. If this was its goal, then congratulations are in order.

Much of the story is familiar. A composer, John Russell (George C. Scott)

lot more than anyone else. Instead, he organizes a seance, where Helen Burns turns in a terrifyingly believable performance as a psychic medium. Through the rather nebulous connection of Scott's recent bereavement, it evolves that a 'presence' is not only trying to communicate with him, but also gain his assistance to settle an old score.

Ultimately, this brings Scott to old Senator Joe Carmichael (Melvyn Douglas in an excellent performance). However, in the final confrontation, even Douglas is unable to overcome the inconsistencies built into his character, and the result undermines a scene on which so much hinges that it sets a wonky tone for the bang-up, no-holds-barred, burn-down-all-the-sets ending.

With few exceptions, there seems to have been little restraint in any area of this production.

The script by William Gray and Diana Maddox, from the story by Russell Hunter, brings into play all the well-worn tactics of the genre, though many of them, on their own, work effectively — largely due to George C. Scott's almost consistently intelligent performance.

Rick Wilkins' score contains a sweet and haunting melody and the cues are admirable. But in the end, the music is laid on too thickly, as though silence behind scenes is almost unthinkable, and the audience must be continually reminded of how nervous it should be.

Trevor Williams' art direction is another area where the film goes overboard. Costumes are intrusively tasteful, and the sets so sumptuous that one can't help wondering how these people got so filthy rich.

Director Peter Medak's overall pace is languorous, too often dwelling on the scenery and plot points that are already more than clear. The resulting film runs about twenty minutes too long. Though a good line of tension runs through certain sequences, the meanderings and credibility problems make it tough to maintain.

The most serious error of excess has to do with the character of the 'spirit' in the house, which seems to have been delineated not by the writers, but by what must have been an enormous special effects budget.

If this spirit can make thunderous sounds, open and slam doors, strike piano keys, break windows, switch on lights, turn on taps, make its voice heard on tape, dictate musical compositions to Scott's unconscious, throw glasses, instantaneously retrieve a child's ball thrown into a distant river, push wheelchairs around, make gold chains slink up

out of the ground, appear to a child in another house, shatter mirrors, cause fatal car accidents, violently shake massive pieces of furniture in an office miles away, set fires and cause hurricane winds (even indoors), what does it really need Scott for?

With its four, major, foreign stars, the one area where this picture has managed to show restraint is in its use of Canadian performers. Much has been made of this lately, and with good reason. It's amazing to see just how tiny these token cameos for indigenous talent can become; and taking co-star billing for a three-minute part seems a humiliating concession.

Most noticeable among the locals, aside from those mentioned, is a flash of Barry Morse as a parapsychologist, and a single scene of John Colicos in a broad, eye-popping parody of a police chief.

Trish Van Devere's performance so often relies on bland and elegant poise, and an impeccable wardrobe, that one is

tempted to speculate that her participation, and name above the title, could be one of the perks that goes along with being Mrs. George C. Scott.

The Changeling won 'Best Picture' at Canada's Genie Awards; but alas, these things are relative. In the American system, this would be comparable to something less than **The Omen** or **The Offering** winning a Best Picture Oscar.

In addition, **The Changeling** will undoubtedly do business, and could even garner good reviews in certain places. But there's something vaguely dishonest about this picture. At its core, it has not been well enough constructed to offer much more than a rehash of some of the gothic-suspense genre's most tortured clichés, and no amount of spectacular production value is really able to compensate.

Roy Moore

Jean Beaudin's Cordélia

p.c. National Film Board in collaboration with Radio-Canada p. Jean-Marc Garand p.man. Laurence Paré d. Jean Beaudin a.d. Jacques Benoit sc. Jean Beaudin, Marcel Sabourin, based on novel **La lampe dans la fenêtre** by Pauline Cadieux cont. Monique Champagne art. d. Denis Boucher, Vianney Gauthier d.ph. Pierre Mignot sd. Jacques Blain mus. Maurice Blackburn ed. Jean Beaudin cost. Louise Jobin chief elec. Kevin O'Connell l.p. Louise Portal, Gaston Lepage, Raymond Cloutier, Gilbert Sicotte, James Blendik, Pierre Gobeil, Jean-Louis Roux, Marcel Sabourin, Claude Gauthier, Jean-Pierre Masson, Julie Morand, Michelle Rossignol, Olivette Thibault, Lionel Villeneuve, Rolland Bédard, Françoise Berd, Roger Garand, Jean Gascon, Henry Ramer, Serge Thériault pub. Les Films Mutuels col. 35mm length 118 min. year 1979 dist. Les Films Mutuels.

"Guilty for having loved life... Condemned for having lived it passionately." So cry out these lines from the advertisement which, along with a picture of Cordélia (Louise Portal) pulling at prison bars, announces that this is a tragic film of injustice. Cordélia Viau's husband was murdered in 1897, and the film is about the unjust trial and hanging of Cordélia and her supposed lover, Samuel. *La Presse* claims the affair "still haunts the memory of the population" of Quebec, and that it has become a legend here.

Cordélia is a film of social criticism, and in particular, a criticism of Quebec

society at the turn of the century. The overwhelming power of the Catholic Church parallels that of the legal system, and is just as oppressive. The force behind

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