

ARTS



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Hopper's *Hot* direction aids Johnson vehicle

by Jim Russell

The Hot Spot
directed by Dennis Hopper
produced by Orion Pictures

Smooth and easy are the two things you'll notice first about *The Hot Spot*.

Based on the novel *Hell Hath No Fury* by Charles Williams, *The Hot Spot* is set in a small backroad Texas town. It's a classic tale of adultery and blackmail in which the outcome is never in doubt; yet, the script is so well structured, the metaphors so expertly woven and the dialogue so highly polished that you can't help but follow the story with fascination.

Harry Madox, played by Don Johnson, is a smooth talking pawn, a man who advocates "seizing opportunities," but whose good looks and inability to keep his pants on doom him to being the "opportunity" that is seized by others. This time it is Dolly Harshaw (Virginia Madsen), his boss' wife, who latches on to his life.

Although Harry initially shrugs her off as another sleazy woman in another hick town, Dolly turns out instead to be a very ambitious woman who, by her own admission, always gets what she wants. And, she wants Harry.

With her husband George (Jerry Hardin) off hunting big game, Dolly turns to fishing. From



The Hot Spot, starring Don Johnson and Virginia Madsen (sharing a moment above), is smooth and easy. Directing doesn't get much better.

the first "welcome to my lair" scene, we know that Harry never had a chance. Still, Dolly spins her web so thoroughly we can't help but watch in morbid awe.

Madsen is terrific. Sensuous and sinister, she uses her considerable physical charms to overcome Harry's reluctance. There is a lot of nudity and sex in this film, but it is never exploited; therefore,

it is never objectionable.

Contrasting Madsen's character is Gloria (Jennifer Connelly), who represents the innocence and good that Harry can never have, the life he will never live. Eventually, it is her dark secret that drives Harry to murder and thus seals his fate.

Not being a Don Johnson fan, I nevertheless have to admit that he

did a hell of a job with his character. You could see the desperation in his every move, as Dolly's sheer force of will drew him closer and closer to his doom. You almost felt sorry for him, a man imprisoned by his sexual greed.

The director of photography, Ueli Steiger, (*Promised Land* and *Some Girls*) lit *The Hot Spot* with skill and patience, then let the

story, the cast and the haunting soundtrack carry the film. No artsy pans, no convoluted angles, just solid photography.

The making of *The Hot Spot* was, quite obviously, a labour of love for director Dennis Hopper, who came onto the film scene in the 60s with a bang, directing co-writing and starring in the now classic *Easy Rider*. Hopper has appeared in thirteen films in the last five years, among them *Flashback*, *Chattahoochie*, and *Hoosiers*, a much underrated film, in which he co-starred with another versatile actor, Gene Hackman.

The 1988 L.A. gang movie *Colours* got him restarted into directing full time. To Hopper's credit, I don't think directing gets much better than this. A couple of times he indulges himself and slips into a bit of "camp," but the overall excellence of the film makes these spots hardly noticeable.

The script for *The Hot Spot*, by Nona Tyson and Charles Williams, came to the attention of Producer Paul Lewis more than 20 years ago. At that time, he saw it as a vehicle for Robert Mitchum and his son Jim. So, when Hopper approached him with a revised version, he was presold.

The Hot Spot deserved a shot at the brass ring.

I give it a 10 out of 10.



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