

Chinatown, my Chinatown...

# Back to Bogie with crafty Gittes



By JULIAN BELTRAME

The summer months saw many new and varied arrivals on the Toronto movie scene, but the one film that's liable to make the most impact when the dust has settled and the advertising stunts have ended, is Roman Polanski's mystery-social-commentary, Chinatown.

The film is special because it has assembled all the ingredients of fine film-making into one unified package. Producer Robert Evans acquired a proven mystery director in Polanski, who achieved fame in the compelling but inconsequential Rosemary's Baby, and later proved he could handle a serious work when he directed and helped adapt Shakespeare's Macbeth for, of all people, Hugh Hefner.

Polanski in turn coaxed fine performances from the stars (Jack Nicholson, Faye Dunaway), all the way down to bit parts handled by unknowns.

Nicholson is so good that he can't miss out on his third best actor nomination; and possibly, if there is any justice in Hollywood, he'll wind up with the Oscar this time. He has already established himself as one of the finest American actors to come along recently, and his depiction of the sarcastic, snooping private dick, J.J. Gittes, is further proof of his immense talent and versatility.

Faye Dunaway hands in one of the best performances of her erratic

career, suiting the bill perfectly as a rich, sensual and mature member of the thirties' propellor-set crowd. Also featured is director-actor John Huston as the half-crazed, one-time owner of the entire water supply of Los Angeles and of many other things best not mentioned.

Apparently Polanski studied Huston's Maltese Falcon for months before setting out to do Chinatown. It must have worked because Chinatown not only captures the feel of Huston's mystery-classic, but also the feel of the times.

Careful observation reveals quite a few similarities between the two films. Both Nicholson and Dunaway start out as typical Bogart-and-female characters: she always finding a convincing lie to cover up the one she has just told, and he never really believing her but always acting on her information. To the film's credit, much more is at stake this time than a valuable bird.

The lighting techniques and soundtrack also remind us of a style of film-making long since abandoned. For those still in doubt, Polanski throws in a little Mexican boy who cannot help but remind us of the Mexican boy in Huston's Treasure of the Sierra Madre. Like the one in Huston's film, this boy too holds the key to the mystery.

Despite all the plaudits which can deservedly be placed on Polanski and Nicholson, the one man most

responsible for the film's quality is writer Robert Towne, who wrote the tight two hour and 20 minute script, which never once allows the audience to relax.

Towne's script is liberally sprinkled with humorous situations and dialogue, but nicely escapes the cutesie nature of last year's The Sting. The story brings together an assortment of diverse characters, each figuring prominently in the denouement.

We are constantly surprised but never cheated by the story line. The driving force of the film is the unravelling of a tapestry carefully woven by Towne; each new revelation is followed by a sense that what remains to be discovered will prove more important than what has just been revealed. We are not disappointed in this expectation.

As one might expect from such a film, even the title is hard to figure out. Gittes began his investigating career in Chinatown working for the district attorney, "doing as little as possible", and the film seems to constantly lead back to that place; but it only gets there in time for the final confrontation.

Chinatown is a place where things aren't what they appear to be, where the respectable aren't, and where one can wind up guaranteeing the death of a friend by trying to protect him. The mystery of what lies at the heart of Chinatown — both the title.

the film, and the place — are never fully revealed until the final take, at which time everything fits together like a jigsaw puzzle, and we are convincingly shown who wins out in American life.

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