

PROM NIGHT fulfils formula obligations

by Frank McGinn

Movies that thoroughly fulfill their contractual obligations are not such a common occurrence that **Prom Night** can be dismissed simply because its terms are limited to the shock-and-grab bag. A film may be liked or disliked for what it is but it has a right to be rated according to how well it does it. And **Prom Night** delivers. It is an honours graduate of the don't-look-now-baby-but-there-seems-to-be-a-revenge-obsessed-sharp-blade-wielding-homicidal-psychopath-right-behind-your-school.

Certain details are common to all movies of this ilk. Big, ugly bread knives and meat cleavers, for one. Dead is dead but few would tremble were the killer to stalk his prey with a .38 or a blunt instrument. It is the terrible anticipation of the gory slicing to come which makes the audience sick with fear. Which makes them have a good time. (Which makes them really sick, according to some people, but that's another tin of tunafish.) And the victims must mostly be nubile, adolescent girls. The odd boyfriend or janitor may be dispatched if he gets in the way but the general rule is that beautiful co-eds, particularly if sexually active, are living on

borrowed time. Other elements in common include: a cop who knows that something is amiss but is always too late and in the wrong place; copious bloodletting; large, empty buildings, for being chased through; long lurking silences, punctuated by sharp screams and nervous laughter from the audience; and Jamie Lee Curtis, lately.

In other words, these are formula pictures. But it is a little known fact, because the people who see such films don't usually go on about them and the people who go on about them haven't usually seen them, that there are maddog-killer movies and there are maddog-killer movies. They all

aim to inspire visceral terror, ideally to the point of uncontrollable bowel spasms and heart attacks, but they are not all accurate. Some of them hit only the funnybone, as various, cringing wretches are chopped up at regular intervals. This one has no narrative power and that one has such acting that dismemberment and decapitation seem too good for them. Many more are disjointed, unbelievable and worth only a depraved giggle.

That is why **Prom Night** deserves an accolade. Its aspirations may be low but at least it realizes them. To mangle a metaphor, it takes the formula and runs with it. The plot is stretched taut. The

characters, mainly high school students, are attractive and convincingly normal, to fine dramatic effect. The atmosphere of your typical, American high school is evoked with a loving eye for the nuances of class and locker room. And the camera work is smoother and slipperier than satin sheets on a water bed. It feints and dances like a boxer before delivering this or that devastating blow.

Towering over its negligible competition as it does, **Prom Night** is this week's winner of my Big Toad in a Small Pond Award. Like the best Big Mac you ever ate, it is as good as something can be that has no real substance to it.

Murder at its best and lifeless

by Michael McCarthy

Movie Review: **Psycho** and **The Laughing Policeman**

The latest double-offering from the Murder Mystery Film Series featured the classic Hitchcock film **Psycho** and the deservedly little-known **The Laughing Policeman**, starring Walter Matthau and crazy Bruce Dern.

Psycho is arguably the best murder mystery ever produced. Based on the book by Robert Bloch, it was filmed in 1960 with a cast including Janet Leigh, John Gavin, Vera Miles, Martin Balsam, and Anthony Perkins. It was shot in black and white, which accentuates the shadowy appearances of the murderer,

and the eerie aspects of the movie, which is flawless right down to the nerve-jolting background music (which always enhances and never obtrudes) and the separating/merging images of the opening graphics, which set the mood for the unsteady personalities involved in the story.

The first half-hour of the film follows a dissatisfied secretary who, on an impulse, runs off with \$40,000 entrusted to her. After a number of tense moments arising from her guilt and paranoia, she arrives at an out-of-the-way motel to spend the night. She meets a shy, troubled young man who appears to live with his invalid mother. Then follows the famous shower scene, where a



female-appearing figure brutally slaughters the secretary in a masterpiece of suspense/shock filming. A private detective who investigates is also murdered, apparently by a female. In the clever disentanglement of events that follows, it becomes clear that the young man is schizoid, and that bizarre forces conflicting in his will made him kill and cover up the killings. Anthony Perkins is riveting as the psychopath, the war of personalities within him visible in eerie transitions as he talks, with numerous subtle alterations in his physical bearing that add up to a new and different person. Just how different is a revelation that remains thrillingly obscured until the end of the movie, which is pure suspense all the way through.

The Laughing Policeman is based on a book by Wahloo and Sjowall about a policeman who is so obsessed with his

job that he never laughs, or smiles... or talks, hardly. This latter is unfortunate, since he is the only one who knows what is going on as he attempts to track down a mass-murderer. The audience never has a clue as to why he is doing what he does, or what he is feeling. We never understand the means by which he uncovers the killer. All we can do is watch equally confused Bruce Dern, the central figure's partner, try desperately hard to seem macho, and wind up giving a tense and irritating performance. We never find out why the killer acts as he does, either. The movie is a lifeless, ascetic conglomeration of confused scenes which fails utterly to provide the viewer with something to latch on to, to interest him and get him involved.

The next double-bill mystery showing is Dec. 4, when **The Ipress File** and **The Day of the Jackal** are the fare.

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Theatre Arts Guild : 3 for 2

by Stan Beeler

The Theater Arts Guild presents: **3 for 2**. That is three Nova Scotian plays for the very reasonable price of two Canadian dollars. They were presented at the Pond Playhouse in Jollimore from November fifth to the eighth and were well worth the trouble of tracking down.

The first play, **Festival of the Arts**, was written by L.S. Loomer and directed by Liz Tapley. Although, I did not find this the best of the three presentations, the cast did very well considering the restrictions imposed upon them by the script. The scene is a cocktail party after a folksong concert at the Nova Scotian Festival of the Arts. The humor in the play is derived from the stereotyping of the guests. For the most part they are bad artists from outside of Nova Scotia who have come here to ply their mediocre wares. They are confronted by one rather laconic

"true" Nova Scotian author. The mincing homosexual is played to such a degree by Mark Dawe that we have the impression that he mocks the cliché rather than the gays.

The second play, **Man in the Basement**, was, in my opinion, the best of the three. It was written by Andrew Wetmore and directed by Jim R. Spurway. The main theme of this play, the inability of the individual to determine objective reality, is communicated remarkably well by the actress Carol Salah. She plays an elderly lady who has apparently locked the power man in her basement during a meter inspection. The voice of the man in the basement (played by Bobby Featherstone) pleads with her to remember why he is there and to release him. The masterful creation of tension in this play is reminiscent of the work of Harold Pinter. At times we wonder if the voice is really a figment of a senile woman's

imagination and at times we have complete sympathy with the young man's desire for freedom.

The third play, **Night of Betrothal**, written by Doris Baillie Phillips and directed by Alan Shepherd, is a sort of situation comedy which derives its humor from the quaint accent and customs of the people of a small fishing village in southwestern Nova Scotia. Gerald L. Fraser's portrayal of a drunken fisherman is delightful. In fact, the entire cast succeeds in maintaining the tone of gentle caricature that is necessary in a work of this sort. Although this play lacked the depth of plot that **Man in the Basement** provided it was, in its own sphere, quite good.

It is unfortunate that entertainment of this quality must be presented so far from the center of Halifax. Only those who are blessed with an automobile may attend with ease.