

ENTERTAINMENT

Guess what - - more violence

The Evil That Men Do Tristar Pictures

review by John Charles

If the evil men do really lives after them, Charles Bronson is in trouble.

But a movie like *The Evil That Men Do* seems more likely to get swept into the cinematic dust-bin at year's end, rather than be remembered as the season's biggest clunker. It's not even distinguished in a negative way.

Bronson, now a tired-looking 63, plays Holland, a retired professional killer, called in to polish off the sadistic Dr. Molloch (Joseph Maher), who practices torture for military governments that can afford him. He spends most of his time in Central America, but helps the American ambassador in the odd nasty job, as we learn to our jaundiced dismay.

Maybe Holland had some personal traits in R. Lance Hill's novel, but they've been scrapped in favor of Bronson's current persona: the man who kills bad people because no one else can do it. We learn absolutely nothing about Holland as a person, because it doesn't matter. The movie exists so we can watch Bronson dispatch these vermin in imaginative ways, and what is there to know about a killing machine, except possibly what kind of oil to use on movable parts?

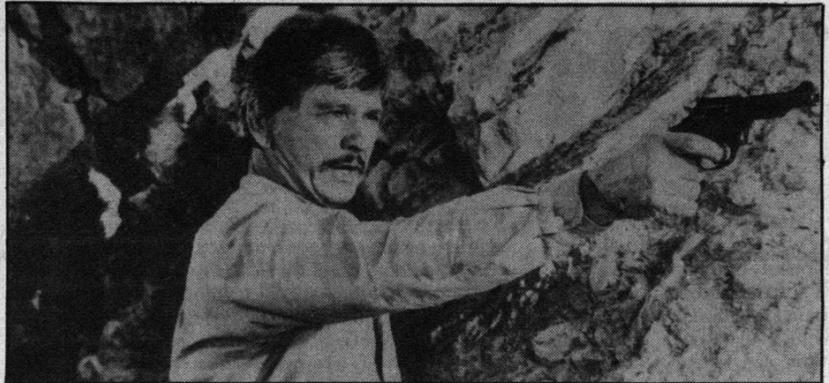
But it's so hard to come up with a plot that works these days, if it doesn't somehow reflect the real world. So this vehicle, with only action entertainment on its mind, gets into some unpleasant stuff where you'd think a few moral questions, ethics - all that sophomoric nonsense - would inevitably surface.

Like the opening scene, where a political prisoner is slowly, graphically electrocuted. It's the most disturbing death in the movie because of the method, and the fact that Bronson isn't doing it. Its purpose is to show just how bad these bad guys are, thus justifying anything Bronson does. But it's filmed with the same relish as Bronson's ingenious killings - such as throwing a knife at the doctor's bodyguard, Randolph (Raymond St. Jacques), and getting him in the throat. Your reaction to such deaths tends to be either a certain glee or a certain disgust, but it's triggered by the event, not the motive behind it. So we end up watching the electrocution the way the doctor's own military audience does - not with compassion but with curiosity, like a lab experiment. Somehow I don't think Amnesty International would regard this as consciousness raising.

Director J. Lee Thompson made *The Guns of Navarone* some 20 years back, and several other action movies which are still entertaining. But that level of accomplishment seems behind him, and *Evil* moves at a clumsy pace, with surprisingly little suspense. And his standards for a viable script have also slipped.

The villainess is Molloch's sister, Claire (Antoinette Bower), who turns out to be - yuck! - a lesbian. In a macho movie that's a step below even the sadistic doctor.

And the heroine is a vapid, tiresome young widow, Rhiana (Theresa Saldana), who's along with Bronson to make it look like he has a family (her daughter's along too). She can't figure Bronson out, and says things like: "Doesn't the violence ever get to you?" Or, to a friend, "He's cold and bloodless," whereupon she remembers that Bron-



Charles "Shoot 'em up" Bronson in *The Evil That Men Do*

son can read lips. She keeps deciding she's going to leave because all this murder is so awful, then tags after him, whining. She's like a sixth-grade boy's idea of girls - totally dependent, demanding, and no fun at all. And Saldana has no charm or personal quality to make us care about her in spite of her role.

As for Bronson, if you're not into his cool, emotionless persona already, this movie won't show you why he's so popular. (*Evil* just earned 4.5 million dollars in the first week-end of its release.)

He seems to have learned his lines phonetically, since he delivers none of them with any meaning whatsoever. Watching Eastwood you sense behind his mask an alert presence who declines to comment or engage the world for his own reasons. A movie like Eastwood's current *Tightrope* is possible because we believe there are possible depths-doubts, anxieties - in his controlled exterior. But Bronson is entirely cardboard.

We keep waiting for a romantic concern to blossom between Holland and Rhiana, and the movie's last shot suggests that love is lurking beyond the final credit. But you get the feeling nothing happened during the movie because there was no way the audience would have believed it, with this pair of cold fish.

Bronson's silent-killer persona, and his sensational box-office success since *Death Wish* (1974), the first of his vigilante justice scenarios, is only a postscript to the best part of his career. When movie fans defend Bronson, they inevitably name his three best 1960s flicks, *The Magnificent Seven*, *The Great Escape*, and *The Dirty Dozen*. And in all of them he was one of a bunch of guys, whose collective bravado and balls made for an exciting adventure movie. The movies weren't about Bronson.

But neither is *The Evil That Men Do*. It's about death as a commodity, and Bronson is just the salesman.

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