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SEA OF LOVE

(Harold Becker - Director)

A duplicitous little monster in the best tradition of what's-going-on-behind-the-camera? tingers, *Sea of Love* isn't actually as bad as you've been lead to believe. For the first half hour the sleuths in the audience are perplexed as to why three middle-aged men are shown dry-humping the mattress with preternatural enthusiasm only to have their respective crania severely ventilated by a large bullet.

Of course Pacino is in it so, despite the original premise that is is about a New York cop with personal problems (whce! what a fresh approach), the cinephile has got to get a look, and well worth it it is too. Initially we have reservations Pacino's Frank Weller, a twenty year veteran up for retirement, stumbles through the introductory segments like a somnambulist; almost minimalist in his delivery with bags under his eyes the size of small rugsacks.

"Something Al walked through in his lunch-hour" I note mentally and sit back expecting a rather unspectacular film. After a while however Weller's laconic and world weary persona begins to have a subliminal effect on us. The very nature of the effortless performance draws us in, make us scrutinize every movement and off-the-cuff witticism for something more substantial to go on with.

Meanwhile Frank thinks about the dead dry-humpers. At a salutatory police dinner (where Detective Weller is show to be not completely ordinary-he indulges in a friendly bout of Tae-Kwon-Do with an oriental

colleague) he meets another detective that has come across an almost identical murder in a neighboring precinct. Now the fun starts. The nasty under rated John Goodman plays Pacino's counterpart and the relationship that develops between them is tremendous fun to watch.

Eventually our friends establish that all murder victims were wart to place rhyming messages on the personals section of the local newspaper. "I've got it" says Frank. "We place our own rhyming message, wait for the women to respond (the assailant is a femme fatale, match) meet 'em for a drink, get their fingerprints on a wine glass and whammo! case closed! And so the plot continues with such gratuitously obvious clumping steps that it would rarely make any difference if the film makers flashed cue-card messages onto the screen explaining what is going to happen in the next twenty minutes.

Yes it's not long before the painfully gorgeous Ellen Barkin shows up on the scene and if any member of the audience doesn't click that Weller will eventually do the Wild Thing with the suspect, then the likelihood that that person either enjoys professional wrestling or is a member of the engineering department is rather high. Off we go then, launched on the good old is she/isn't she format so quickly that one can almost hear the writer's yawning in the background.

Nevertheless we continue to enjoy the development of

Pacino's character. While we are cognizant of the fact that Weller has an admirable talent for street-wise savvy, we learn that he can also be brutally thick. On a surprise visit to the shoe shop run by Barkin's jocularly named Helen Crueger, he is still moving around his new flame under the disguise of actually being in the printing profession. Suddenly their moment of snatched intimacy is disrupted by two young mafioso who enquire about designer boots. Rather than turn away, Weller stares them down until one of them is virtually forced to recognize that he is in fact a policeman. Outside the shop, Helen confronts Frank with this recent enlightenment, only to be given the whole story that their first date was actually accompanied by a wire-tap. He has a meaty cock-and-bull disclaimer for all of this, but one wonders why all of a sudden we are being told that Frank is, in no uncertain terms, a bit of a knob-end. Essentially we settle for the fact that the lonely detective is becoming crazed with affection and perilously throwing caution to the wind.

Director Harold Becker likes to grab his subjects at close quarters. While there is little of that vaguely irritating obsession with tiny detail, he certainly does like to frame the actors in as small a working space as possible. This is probably to achieve a greater degree of suspense in a you-are-there sort of way but in retrospect, the technique lacks a little precision - producing a vague claustrophobia more than anything else. In that respect this is the sort of film that Alan Parker would do wonders with and it is possible that it is this latter directors influence that had the greatest impact in the production of *Sea of Love*. By coincidence (surely?) Trevor Jones, probably the most important contemporary film score composer since Morricone, lends his mixture of saxophone, ethereal synth voices and subtle cardiac percussion to the film's action which benefits quite considerably as a result. Conceptually, however the score is based almost entirely on one of Jones previous projects namely *Angel Heart*. Barely audible bass drones climb out of nowhere to herald the richly textured

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music of sweaty dread and anticipation.

Having endured the paint by numbers plot, we gird our loins for a climax of almost grand guignol proportions but unfortunately I must admit to feeling rather cheated. True, the solution to the crime comes straight out of nowhere, but it is a solution that really doesn't draw any strings together except for the notion of someone slapping you about the ears with a stick of celery chuckling (see - you would never have figured it out in a million years, smart ass!)

You could do a lot worse than catch *Sea of Love* though. Pacino is remarkably effective,

Goodman is superb and both are probably bubbling under next year's Oscar's list. Barkin is not hot and after the Big Easy, it won't be long before some barely literate dickhead in People magazine will be referring to her as the next Basinger (what? - already?) But in the end one can't help wondering if this movie has been hastily assembled. It lacks a certain cohesiveness and fluidity that is imperative for a great opus. The closing question would be why the hugely significant parts are not allowed to realize an exemplary whole.

Steve Griffiths

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