

'Orient Express' — old elegance

Could it be that for the first time we have entered a movie era when film makers have finally stopped droning on and on that they don't make movies like they used to and, instead, have started making movies like they used to?

Chinatown, *Young Frankenstein*, *The Front Page* and Peter Bogdanovich's upcoming musical *At Long Last Love* all seem to look back in envy and reach back in time to capture a bit of the style, wit and flair of a more golden age of movie making.

To be sure, the biggest motivation still may be the perpetual nostalgia trend yet there seems to be some respect involved as old genres are reworked. As we enter our own "mild recession," people turn back to the movies and movies turn back the clock. People still won't go see an old movie but they'll eagerly flock to see a new movie that's dressed in old clothes.

greg lukow
key grip

30's styled mystery

Which brings us to *Murder on the Orient Express*, an opulent, '30s-styled mystery taken literally from Agatha Christie's novel and cinematically from Alfred Hitchcock, all via *The Great Gatsby*. The movie is bathed in unbelievably classy costuming, shimmering photographic style and a myriad of shady superstars cavorting in properly balanced proportions of elegance and evasiveness.

Albert Finney plays the famous Belgian detective, Hercule Poirot. He just happens to be on the Orient Express (a train traveling through Europe from Istanbul) in the winter of 1935, when a wealthy American businessman is brutally murdered in his sleeping car. The nicest little mysteries always seem to happen on trains.

The suspects come from the host of international names that make up the rest of the case. Some are very big stars. A few are legends. I won't name them all but my favorites turned out to be Anthony Perkins (with his usual neurotic quirks), Lauren Bacall (acting obnoxiously bitchy), Vanessa Redgrave (in a small but earthily seductive role) and, most of all, one of

the great cinema *grande dames*, Ingrid Bergman. **Bergman closeup**

The movie makers must have especially appreciated getting Bergman in the picture. In one scene, when Poirot interrogates her, the camera comes close to making an icon of her, lingering on an extreme close-up on her face without interruption for what must be nearly five minutes.

The movie was directed by Sidney Lumet, (*Serpico*). There is no apparent link between that socially conscious cop movie and this film to even indicate they were done by the same man. I guess this is another sign of how things have changed in the past year.

Lumet and cinematographer Geoffrey Unsworth have given us a delectable movie to look at, even aside from the fashion show. Unfortunately, once inside the train, the film is shot with so many close ups that it becomes suffocating. If one didn't know better, one might think most of it was filmed inside an actual train compartment with little room for camera setups.

Too calculated

The movie is too calculated for its own good. During the key scenes when we suspect the murder is taking place (we have no idea why), every shot and action is an irritating disguise or dropped clue.

I couldn't help recalling Alfred Hitchcock's first axiom for good cinematic suspense: let the audience have some idea what's happening (play out enough rope) and let the worrying be about whether the characters will find out. On the screen in *Orient Express*, the failure to do this ultimately makes Finney's marvelously acted Poirot look rather one dimensional. Finney makes him a logical, eccentric little frog of a person who magically solves the mystery—we aren't allowed to see how. All this is not to fault Christie's novel but to point out that this type of mystery reads better than it's viewed.

But do see it. Even if they don't make movies like they used to, at least they're coming close.

As a quick finish, I'd like to extend special kudos to the Ultimate Censor who, through his handmaiden (a local TV station), managed to protect public sensibilities by excising 33 minutes from Alfred Hitchcock's *Frenzy* Saturday night. The Motion Picture Association of America should have it so good.

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