

# arts & entertainment



## Entertaining 'Marathon Man' fits thriller billing

By Will Huffman

*Marathon Man* is a nasty, ruthless and totally entertaining thriller.

It begins on a tense note and never lets up for a moment. The movie is an example of superb cinematic engineering, directed towards one single goal—audience involvement.

Dustin Hoffman plays Babe Levy, a Columbia graduate student who is robbed, beaten, shot at and tortured in the course of one of the most relentlessly violent films of the year.

Babe is drawn into a deadly web of international intrigue and double dealing through his older brother, Doc (Roy Scheider).

Doc and his partner, Janeway (William Devane), both work for a shadowy, super-secret government agency that spies on both the FBI and CIA, in addition to performing various other distasteful tasks.

Either as part of their duties, or on their own volition (we never know for sure), Doc and Janeway act as international diamond couriers for a Nazi war criminal named Christian Szell (Laurence Olivier).

### Wealth splendid

Szell resides in secret and isolated splendor somewhere in the Uruguayan jungle, living off the gold and diamonds he has extracted from the Jews in concentration camps.

Szell is also a dentist, which we learn comes in handy for either extracting the gold from his gas oven victims or performing a bit of excruciating, non-novacaine drilling on Hoffman. (This particular scene is bound to make even the most brave-of-heart a wee bit squeamish on their next trip to have a cavity filled).

The film opens with the fiery death of Szell's brother (and only link to the diamond fortune), which forces Szell to come out of hiding, go to New York and attempt to recover his treasure in a bank safety deposit box.

The plot is set in motion when Szell begins to suspect Doc is planning to rob him; and, although we never find out for sure, anything seems plausible in the heartless milieu in which the film is set.

Babe is thrust into a life and death struggle against the well-equipped and superior forces who won't believe he is ignorant of his brother's dealings.

*Marathon Man* is based on the best selling novel by William Goldman, who also wrote the script. Director John Schlesinger (*Midnight Cowboy*, *The Day of the Locust*) gets the tension going early with Hoffman running a fierce race with himself around Central Park.

For most of the rest of the film Hoffman is a man on the run for his life.

### Suspense builds

Schlesinger's direction methodically builds suspense as he cross-cuts between New York, Paris and South America as the plot threads begin to converge.

Lavish production values are in evidence in the fine location photography of New York, Uruguay and Paris. Schlesinger nicely contrasts the opulence of a Parisian Opera house with the urban jungle of New York and the tropical jungle of Uruguay.

However, in Schlesinger's vision, all are populated with the same ruthless brand of operatives struggling in a contest where violent death is an everyday occurrence.



Photo courtesy of Paramount Pictures  
Sir Laurence Olivier plays Christian Szell, a notorious Nazi war criminal and dentist, in *Marathon Man*.

Schlesinger extracts maximum suspense from several sequences.

In one sequence, Szell, the former exterminator of Jews, is recognized and pursued down a street in a Jewish section of New York by two former concentration camp inmates, while the young Jewish bystanders stare with disinterest at the reenactment of a drama more than 30 years old and part of a time and place they don't know or remember.

### Character memorable

Szell, as played by Olivier, is a perfect example of how a great screen presence can create a memorable character. Olivier doesn't have to go to any great lengths to look or act ominous; he can convey all the menace he needs by a small gesture or expression or a quick slash of a foot-long switchblade always concealed in his coat sleeve.

As Babe, Hoffman gives a nervous, energetic performance that makes the audience identify with his dilemma. Extra dimension is added to his character (and plight) by flashbacks explaining how his father, a famous historian, committed suicide as a result of persecution during the McCarthy era.

As the two super-secret agents, Scheider and Devane radiate the kind of cool, well-tailored, impeccably mannered confidence that sets them in stark contrast to the fumbling and seemingly ineffectual Babe.

As the arch-villain Szell has all the Biblical simplicity of vile of all, so it is only natural that the final confrontation

freeze frames



between Babe and Szell has all the Biblical simplicity of David and Goliath.

This scene, shot in the Central Park waterworks, is a perfect climax to the kind of sharp, cold-hearted movie *Marathon Man* is.

### Confrontation final

In their final confrontation, Babe catches Szell leaving the bank with his fantastic fortune of diamonds. Babe holds Szell at gunpoint on a metal grating over the waterworks and calmly tells Szell that he can keep only as many of the diamonds as he can swallow.

It is a grand, fulfilling moment for the audience. We have been so effectively conditioned and drawn into the narrative that we feel the same thirst for revenge as Babe.

Szell places a glittering diamond between his teeth; pauses for a moment, then swallows with a pained expression on his face.

The audience claps and cheers. The movie has been so effective that only the most sophisticated intellectual will not feel a little righteous satisfaction at seeing good triumph over evil. In a distinctively amoral world, the filmmakers have exploited our old desire for clear-cut choices.

After all, movies are entertainment, and when we pay \$2.50 to see "a thriller" (*Marathon Man*'s basic advertisement line) we don't want the movie-makers to fool around. We want our thrills and spills and suspense, and that is exactly what *Marathon Man* delivers.

*Marathon Man* is probably the ultimate in spy thrillers—the best that time and money can buy. One may not agree with its content, but one can't fault its execution.

Speaking of executions—out of the 12 principal characters, 11 are dead by the end of the film. But you'll have to go to the movie to find out who the lucky survivor is.

## Program features heroes' creators

The comic book, a native American art form, will be the topic of a program featuring the creators of some of America's best known comic book heroes.

The program "Creators of Comic Book Heroes," will be the Mid-America College Art Association (MACAA), which is being hosted by the UNL Art Dept.

The program includes a banquet, which will be at 7 p.m. Friday in the Grand Ballroom of the Lincoln Hilton Hotel.

The program, "Creator of Comic Book Heroes," will feature Bob Kane, creator of *Batman*; Will Eisner, creator of *The Spirit*; and C. C. Beck, *Captain Marvel's* creator.

Jules Feiffer, an author, cartoonist, critic and playwright, will preside over the program.

"The comic book," according to Dan Howard, Art Dept. chairman, and president of MACAA, "is one of the few native American art forms. It has been a significant influence on America's popular culture."

The banquet is open to the public. A limited number of tickets are available today from noon to 4 p.m. at the conference registration desk at the Lincoln Hilton Hotel.

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