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'Extremities' uses a sledge hammer when kid gloves are what's needed

By Charles Lieurance
Divisions Editor

Rape is the ultimate violation of all things secret and personal, of the space we know as private and the gestures of affection legally considered a matter of choice.

The first hour of Robert Young's ("The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez") film "Extremities" is one excruciatingly long attempted rape and a similar violation of all things secret and personal. Filmed in '80s "music video" color, made glossy with the rapist's leather and completely awash in (perhaps) subconscious sadism, the whole first hour is pornography for the socially conscious.

The cinematographer and director take no steps to desexualize the attempted rape, not realizing the sexual implications of modern architecture, sexual mannerism and gesture, and color. Filmmakers from Europe, namely Jean-Luc Godard, long ago learned how to manipulate the audience's sexual response towards or away from arousal.

Young's attempted rape is subliminally arousing, thus revolting and quite nearly unwatchable. Five minutes of hints of rape are enough to warrant Farrah Fawcett Majors' vengeance in the final hour. Filmmakers in America and the makers of TV movies of the week seem to work under the rule that you have to show one hour of terror for every half hour of justice.

Rape is a personal crime. Women know what it entails, live with the fear of it daily, are not anesthetized to the details of the crime. Men's basest impulses can only be aroused by such scenes. A man who has rape in him will not be put off by such a heartless display of the atrocity and a man who is not subject to the gender paranoia and need to dominate that characterize most rapists, can only feel a blooming of frustrated male chivalry rise up in him, or arousal through the snap, whirr and leather crackle of this glossy pageant of terror.



Photo courtesy of Atlantic Releasing Corp.

Farrah Fawcett stars as Marjorie, a victim who strikes back at her attacker, in "Extremities," based on the play by William Mastrosimone.

This first hour is enough to make me not recommend "Extremities." It is sloppy and, in its ignorance of film's power, ghastly.

This film does serve, however, to resurrect Farrah Fawcett Majors, the critically-maligned sex-kitten of the '70s. The resurrection is full of promise. Majors as the victimized and finally ruthless Marjorie is stunning, a plethora of failed options. She is constantly caught between striking back and letting things take their course, inertia and momentum trap her in the rapist's psychotic need for power. She goes from tears of hurt, to tears of rage, to utter violent loathing and back to hurt, and always the audience is able to discern the difference.

The final act of the film, which breaks down neatly into such theatrical divisions — the screenplay is written by the same man who wrote the Broadway play, William Mastrosimone — is a microcosm of the judicial system. Marjorie incarcerates the rapist (James Russo) in the fireplace after maiming him with boiling water and bug spray and serves as the prosecution against her roommate's objections

to burying him in the garden in lieu of calling the police.

These scenes, although often stretching the limits of reality and, at times, slipping into morbidly humorous melodrama, are well-performed by Diana Scarwid and Alfre Woodard, as the judge and district attorney.

The film doesn't enlighten and frequently courses along only on its own sensationalism and the presence of Majors. What isn't completely gruesome and inexcusable in "Extremities" has been covered more than adequately by numerous made-for-TV movies (a moving one with Lindsay Wagner comes to mind). All in all, I can't think of what kind of mood I'd have to be in to witness such a web of cinematic mistakes, mistakes that do not bore an audience — that could be laughed off — but mistakes which offend and traumatize.

If the filmmakers just wanted everyone to talk about this movie, they've won. If they wanted to comment on the nature of the crime, build suspense or, God forbid, entertain, they have failed miserably.

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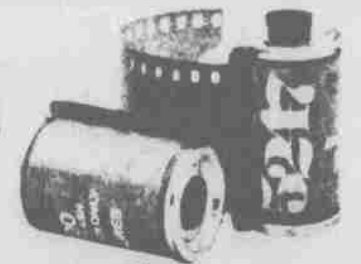
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