

CHANNEL 4 Film Reviews

Sidney Lumet



Critical Care

107 minutes

Australia/United States (1997)

starring Helen Mirren , James Spader , Anne Bancroft , Albert Brooks , Kyra Sedgwick , Jeffrey Wright

written by Steven Schwartz

directed by Sidney Lumet

Spader is a conscientious young doctor who becomes embroiled in a battle of wills when two sisters argue over the fate of their terminally ill father and his fortune. When the good doctor practises his bedside manner by sleeping with one of the sisters he is caught on camera and his ethics are called into question. Lumet's satire on the medical profession and modern morality is not as caustic, nor as smart as *Network* and an unhealthy dose of sickly sweet sentimentality doesn't go down well, but it's kept alive by Spader's considerable charm and an endearing performance by Brooks as a amnesiac old-timer.

Night Falls on Manhattan

113 minutes

United States (1996)

15

starring Richard Dreyfuss , Ian Holm , Andy Garcia , Lena Olim , James Candeletini

written by Sidney Lumet

directed by Sidney Lumet

Not nearly as memorable as some of Lumet's earlier efforts, this police drama nonetheless retains the interest well and has some fine performances, notably from Garcia and Holm as an unlikely father-son pairing. Garcia is the newly elected District Attorney whose first assignment involves investigating a possible corruption case within the police force, the only problem being that his enquiries lead him to believe his dad and partner are at the root of it. Solid rather than sensational, there's nothing new here but it's done competently, and Lumet seems right at home with this kind of material.

Guilty As Sin**107 minutes****United States (1993)****15**

starring Jack Warden , Stephen Lang , Ron White , Dana Ivey , Don Johnson , Rebecca De Mornay

written by Larry Cohen

directed by Sidney Lumet

Tense courtroom drama that promises much but ultimately fails to deliver. Jennifer Haines (De Mornay) is an ambitious and successful lawyer who meets her match when she accepts the brief of a client called Greenhill (Johnson) a smooth-talking Lothario accused of killing his wife. As the case unfolds it becomes clear that he has chosen his attorney for a reason, and mind games between lawyer and client begin. There's some finely scripted erotic tension and Lumet directs with a sure hand, but then a cliché-ridden ending goes and spoils the fun.

Close to Eden**109 minutes****United States (1992)****15**

starring Melanie Griffith , John Pankow , Lee Richardson , Mia Sara , Tracy Pollan , Eric Thail

written by Robert J Avrech

directed by Sidney Lumet

Try this for a movie pitch: Griffith is an undercover Jew. No, really. Required to infiltrate New York's hard-core Hassidic community, detective Griffith undergoes an astonishing transformation. One minute she's asking impolite questions about concentration camp tattoos, the next she's sporting a shawl and a bouffant hairdo, making chicken soup and falling in love with the elder's scholastic son. Utter bilge from beginning to end, this horrendous cross between Witness and Cruising was originally entitled A Stranger Among Us but was renamed after merciless panning in the states. A career low-point for both Griffith and director Lumet who, frankly, should have known better.

Family Business**113 minutes****United States (1989)****15**

starring Dustin Hoffman , Sean Connery , Matthew Broderick , Bill McCutcheon , Janet Carroll , Victoria Jackson

written by Vincent Patrick

directed by Sidney Lumet

Ultimately disappointing comic crime thriller that does boast a fine cast on top form. Given the talent involved (Connery, Hoffman and Broderick as three generations of the same family, and Lumet in the director's chair), this comic crime thriller is a huge disappointment; neither funny nor particularly thrilling, it merely plods on dully to its predictable conclusion.

The family business of the title is burglary and when youngest, Broderick decides he wants to enter the profession, retired criminals Hoffman and Connery are both sucked in.

The actual heist that the trio pull off is exciting, and the performances classy, but a weak script which strives for two genres and slips awkwardly between both leaves this floundering.

Running on Empty

116 minutes

United States (1988)

15

starring River Phoenix , Martha Plimpton , Christine Lahti , Judd Hirsch , LM Kit Carson , Ed Crowley

written by Naomi Foner

directed by Sidney Lumet

Deception has become a way of life for 1960s radicals Arthur and Annie Pope, on the run from the FBI for 15 years, following an anti-Vietnam protest which resulted in an innocent man's blinding and paralysis. They periodically uproot themselves and their sons to seek new homes and identities. But the strain is growing, and their eldest boy Danny (Phoenix) is reluctant to sacrifice his budding musical career and first love Lorna. Lumet's intelligent thriller raises complex issues about family and the socio-political aspects of latter-day America. It gave Phoenix a fine role and an Oscar nomination. What a waste!

Power

111 minutes

USA (1986)

15

starring Gene Hackman , Denzel Washington , Julie Christie , Richard Gere , Kate Capshaw , E G Marshall , Beatrice Straight

written by David Himmelstein

directed by Sidney Lumet

After pinning down American TV broadcasting with the acclaimed Network (1976), director Sidney Lumet here tries to do the same to political campaigning.

Richard Gere plays Pete St John, a media consultant and campaign strategist. St John, who has successfully spearheaded various dubious political campaigns, takes on the task of promoting suspect newcomer Jerome Cade (Walsh) at the request of Washington lobbyist Billings (Washington).

There isn't much in the way of a solid story here. Instead we are given scenes of St John carrying on with his sexy assistant (Capshaw), or encountering his former mentor (Hackman), or boozy, philosophical ex (Christie). It's knowledgeable, occasionally funny, but lacking in direction.

The Morning After

103 minutes

United States (1986)

15

starring Jeff Bridges , Raul Julia , Jane Fonda , Diane Salinger , Richard Foronjy , Geoffrey Scott

written by James Hicks

directed by Sidney Lumet

Superior drama built around a thriller's plot. Fonda is an actress with a drink problem so bad that she can wake up one morning and find her casual pick-up from the night

before with a knife in his chest and have no idea of how it got there. Bridges is the rough and ready ex-policeman she turns to when she needs help. Lumet doesn't direct it as a conventional thriller; rather he concentrates on the relationship between the two leads - and creates something unusually gripping on an emotional as well as sensational level. Fonda overacts, Bridges underacts and somehow it works out fine.

Garbo Talks

103 minutes

United States (1984)

starring Anne Bancroft , Howard Da Silva , Harvey Fierstein , Hermione Gingold , Carrie Fisher , Catherine Hicks

written by Larry Grusin

directed by Sidney Lumet

Bancroft plays an eccentric and wilful whirlwind, who discovers she has a brain tumour and only six months to live. Her one last ambition is to meet her heroine, Greta Garbo, and her devoted son (Da Silva) sets about trying to make her final dream a reality, adopting increasingly desperate measures to make contact with the Hollywood legend. As he devotes more time to this project he becomes more distant from his wife, but starts to appreciate his mother's obsession. It is a great role for Bancroft, and she attacks it with gusto, but there's nothing else remarkable about this slight and wishy-washy comedy.

Daniel

129 minutes

United States (1983)

15

starring Ellen Barkin , Timothy Hutton , Mandy Patinkin , Amanda Plummer , Lindsay Crouse , Edward Asner

written by EL Doctorow

directed by Sidney Lumet

Lumet's adaptation of El Doctorow's Book of Daniel, based on the Rosenberg case, tells the story of the execution of a pair of married spies, and follows the experiences of their son who, while immersed in his grim family history, is desperate to stop his sister from slipping into madness. Hutton, who for a time cornered the market in tortured young souls, is the angst-ridden youth and sister Plummer proves herself no slouch at weltschmerz. This sets out to be an examination of America's recent history of left-wing politics, but is more of an OK-ish family drama.

The Verdict

129 minutes

United States (1982)

15

starring Paul Newman , James Mason , Jack Warden , Charlotte Rampling , Lindsay Crouse , Milo O'Shea

written by David Mamet

directed by Sidney Lumet

Your Witness! Objection! Sustained! Paul Newman goes into court a drunken bum and comes out a better man in this superb legal drama about a man finding redemption

Before he started drinking, Frank Galvin (Newman) was a promising lawyer. Now, he barely scratches a living as an ambulance chaser. He's recruited to take on a medical malpractice suit and expects to settle out of court: after all, the target is a Catholic hospital and the church is famously keen to avoid scandal. But as he reviews the evidence, something happens. The case offers him a shot at redemption and even though he faces the grandest lawyer in town (Mason), even though his witnesses have gone to ground, even though he knows he can't win, he takes it into the courtroom to try and save himself.

Unlike most Hollywood courtroom dramas, *The Verdict* is more than just a bigger-budget version of *Perry Mason*. While there are the customary calls of "Objection" and "Over ruled" and some familiar plot twists, the director and writer are more interested in following Frank than in the mechanics of the case. Of course, stories of redemption are also a movie cliché but the film never resorts to lazy plotting: Frank earns his salvation through some brave decisions.

Deathtrap

116 minutes

United States (1982)

starring Michael Caine , Joe Silver , Christopher Reeve , Dyan Cannon , Henry Jones , Irene Worth

written by Ira Levin , Jay Presson Allen

directed by Sidney Lumet

Ten years before this movie, Caine had appeared in another theatrical hit, *Sleuth*. Elegant but interminable, that two-hander thriller had him as the obvious victim. In Levin's play he stars as a once successful thriller writer who has been sent a play by a young man (Reeve) which he wants to steal as his own. He plots murder and while all that is fine, the follow-up borders on the incomprehensible. If you find such matters diverting then Lumet's efficiently directed film is just the ticket. No one can fault the energy level (well, perhaps of Cannon) but it's all rather pointless.

Prince of the City

167 minutes

United States (1981)

15

starring Richard Foronjy , Jerry Orbach , Treat Williams , Don Billett , Kenny Marino , Carmine Caridi

written by Jay Presson Allen , Sidney Lumet

directed by Sidney Lumet

Director Lumet delves into the seedier underside of the NYPD to deliver this breathtakingly powerful film based on the true story of how one man's attempt to uncover corruption backfired in his face. Williams (one of the more under-used actors in Hollywood) plays Danny Ciello, a cop working in an unsupervised special unit of the police force, whose methods of gathering evidence and confessions are somewhat unorthodox. However, when his conscience gets the better of him and he decides to blow the whistle on the corrupt behaviour in his department, he finds himself in the awkward position of having to choose between saving his own job and those of his partners, whom he refused to incite. It's lengthy (almost three hours), gritty and almost highly involving, while Williams is superb as the man who, despite the honesty of his actions, is made to feel like the bad guy.

Just Tell Me What You Want

112 minutes

United States (1980)

starring Keenan Wynn , Myrna Loy , Tony Roberts , Peter Weller , Alan King , Ali MacGraw

written by Jay Presson Allen

directed by Sidney Lumet

It's not entirely clear what director Lumet was aiming for when he made this film about a studio boss who'd rather let the business go to the dogs than give his former mistress a share. Uneasily alternating between straight comedy and melodrama, the actors don't seem quite sure in what direction they're heading. Despite the occasionally telling bites at gender issues, *Just Tell Me What You Want* ultimately doesn't add up to very much at all.

The Wiz

134 minutes

United States (1978)

U

starring Diana Ross , Richard Pryor , Mabel King , Michael Jackson , Nipsey Russell , Ted Ross

written by Joel Schumacher

directed by Sidney Lumet

The Wizard of Oz is re-cast with black actors and transposed to the neon-soaked streets of downtown New York. Not as bad as it might sound, with spirited performances from Jackson, Ross and Pryor and its fair share of lively Motown-styled musical numbers. Jackson's producer Quincy Jones augments the songs from the hit Broadway musical by Charlie Smalls with a few tunes of his own. Highlights include 'The Emerald City Ballet' routine and a rousing 'Everybody Rejoice'. The latter illuminates the drab interior of the wicked witch's sweatshop, which is one of a number of imaginative sets created by Tony Walton.

Equus

137 minutes

UK (1977)

15

starring Harry Andrews , Richard Burton , Peter Firth , Joan Plowright , Jenny Agutter , Colin Blakely , Eileen Atkins

written by Peter Shaffer

directed by Sidney Lumet

An Oscar-nominated Richard Burton and Peter Firth star in Sidney Lumet's adaptation of Peter Shaffer's acclaimed play. A disturbed teenager gouges out the eyes of six horses but it's psychiatrist Burton whose most basic assumptions are challenged. A massive hit when it premiered on the stage in 1973 and subsequently a staple on drama school syllabuses around the world, Peter Shaffer's strange and unsettling play 'Equus' was one of the pivotal theatrical works of the 70s - a fact director Sidney Lumet acknowledges by not really adapting it for the screen at all. Fortunately, in Burton and Firth he has two actors capable of bringing Shaffer's dense script to life, even if some of the subtleties are squeezed out by a general sense of rising hysteria. The story, a complex conflation of religion, sex, myth and madness, follows 17-year-old stable-boy Alan Strang (Firth) as he seeks psychiatric treatment after gouging out

the eyes of six horses with a metal spike. Dealing with the case is Dr Martin Dysart (Burton), a man beginning to doubt both the effectiveness and the ethics of psychiatric treatment. What is his job, he wonders, if not to eliminate all the savagery and passion of his patients and return them to a dreadful, deadening normality? "Normal is the good smile in a child's eyes," he says in one of several monologues delivered to the camera. "It's also the dead stare in a million adults. And I am its priest."

The film builds gradually and early scenes - Alan's determination to communicate only by singing lines from TV commercials, for example - are critical of a culture which in Shaffer's eyes fail to satisfy a basic need for mystery and myth. But as the bond between doctor and patient deepens, Dysart comes to feel sympathy for Alan and the bizarre, erotically-charged world he's created - a world in which the boy trusses himself up with a homemade bridle and beats himself with a coat hanger while worshipping a picture of Equus, the horse god who rules him.

Lumet, whose films (*Dog Day Afternoon*, *Network*) have frequently touched on issues of alienation and estrangement, here adopts an approach that's probably too naturalistic - it is, essentially, a film of a very talky play. Consequently there's a sense in which some of the issues never quite leave the seminar room. Towards the end, however, Burton taps into the immense power of Shaffer's lines and when he describes his jealousy of Alan - of the direct line to pagan ecstasy which the boy's madness allows - issue and execution do come together effectively.

It isn't always easy to unpick the many tangled strands at play here and the conclusion deliberately raises more questions than it answers. But Shaffer's writing, powerful performances and the sheer strangeness of the tale make this intense, compelling and frequently uneasy - in every sense of the word.

Verdict

Threatens to collapse beneath the weight of its own symbols and philosophising, but somehow it never does. Built around great performances by Burton and Firth, it's a weighty, wordy, thought-provoking drama that contains moments of great power.

Network

120 minutes

United States (1976)

15

starring Robert Duvall , William Holden , Faye Dunaway , Ned Beatty , Peter Finch , Wesley Addy

written by Paddy Chayefsky

directed by Sidney Lumet

An Oscar-winning Peter Finch gives the performance of a lifetime in this merciless TV satire. Driven mad by corruption, trivia and his network's obsession with ratings, a veteran anchorman threatens to blow his brains out live on air

The sensation-seeking world of television news makes it an easy target for satire but rarely has it been sent up with such relentless, vicious glee. An angry and ironical kick in the eye, *Network's* grim humour and informed attack are as sharp now as they were in 1976.

Howard Beale (Finch) is the embittered broadcaster whose life and ratings are in freefall. When his contract is terminated he announces he'll kill himself on air two weeks hence. Ratings soar and ruthless exec Diane Christiansen (Dunaway) is keen to exploit Beale's sudden popularity, but not even suicidal news readers can bolster viewing figures for ever.

All give expert performances and there's a fine array of supporting characters, including Robert Duvall as an executive who canvases opinion on murder. It's Finch though who provides the film with its frenzied energy, denouncing TV journalism as cynical, exploitative bullshit and leading studio audiences through a chant of "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore."

Indeed there's so much going on here that director Lumet struggles to contain it all. But as an intense, impassioned piece of invective it's compelling stuff and a certain contender for one of the best films about television ever made.

Verdict

Fearless, funny and frank television satire that doesn't take any prisoners.

Writing, performances and direction are all bang on and Finch cooks on gas throughout.

Dog Day Afternoon

130 minutes

USA (1975)

15

starring Charles Durning , Al Pacino , Sully Boyar , John Cazale , Chris Sarandon , Penny Allen

written by Frank Pierson , Patrick Mann

directed by Sidney Lumet

Sidney Lumet directs Pacino in this bizarre, touching, intelligent movie about an inept bank robber trying to raise money for his lover's sex-change op. Amazingly, it's based on a true story

Audiences went mad for this oddball film which touches on sexuality as well as law and order.

Loosely based on a true story, Lumet directs from Pierson's script, based on a news article. Pacino stars as Sonny, the loser who, along with pal Sal(Cazale) commits a bank robbery which goes horribly wrong one hot, summer's afternoon, and the crime turns into a media circus.

Trying desperately to raise money for a sex change operation for his lover Leon (Sarandon), Sonny is a study in ineptitude. As things get progressively worse, he tries to please everyone while only driving himself farther into a corner.

Lumet's skilled direction manages to turn the high-octane energy into something quieter and more sustained.

Murder On The Orient Express

128 minutes

United Kingdom (1974)

PG

starring Wendy Hiller , Sean Connery , Albert Finney , Jacqueline Bisset , Lauren Bacall , Vanessa Redgrave , John Gielgud , Ingrid Bergman , Michael York

written by Paul Dehn

directed by Sidney Lumet

Albert Finney is Hercule Poirot in this highly entertaining whodunit. Played with a nod and a wink, the big-name cast includes John Gielgud, Sean Connery, and an Oscar-winning Ingrid Bergman

After the success of grimy urban thriller *Serpico*, director Lumet adopted an altogether more genteel approach to crime. Based on Agatha Christie's well-loved murder-mystery, *Murder On The Orient Express* is the vehicle for a stream of high

profile star-turns, all of them highly enjoyable, but none of them holding a candle to Finney's implacable Poirot.

The plot hinges on the death of an American businessmen aboard the Istanbul-bound Express. With the number of suspects reduced to twelve first class passengers, Poirot swings into action and discovers that all of them had both motive and opportunity.

In look and tone it's pleasingly old fashioned and each of the big names gets to play to their strengths. Thus Connery's crusty Colonel has an eye for the ladies, Gielgud's Beddoes is a disdainful toff and Poirot himself fusses around marvelling at human stupidity. A spectacular opening sequence renders the film a little front heavy but Lumet negotiates the plots' twists and turns with style and minimal delay.

Verdict

Ever-enjoyable murder mystery that benefits from stylish direction, an expert cast and an undertone of dry humour.

Serpico

129 minutes

USA (1973)

18

starring Tony Roberts , Al Pacino , John Randolph , Jack Kehoe , Biff McGuire , Barbara Eda-Young

written by Waldo Salt , Norman Wexler

directed by Sidney Lumet

An Oscar-nominated Al Pacino stars in Sidney Lumet's gritty New York cop drama. Based on a true story, Frank Serpico is the idealistic cop who refuses to submit to the NYPD's culture of corruption

Sandwiched between *The Godfathers I and II*, this sprawling but powerful drama consolidated Al Pacino's reputation as one of Hollywood's most skilled and charismatic performers. Subsequently it has slipped off the radar somewhat, but in its broad scope, its world-weary tone and bleak conception of authority it ranks among the best in 70s crime drama.

The story spans 11 years in the life of Frank Serpico (Pacino), memorably described in the original tagline as "the most dangerous man alive - an honest cop". Looking distinctly Christ-like with his long hair and beard, Serpico is a hipster 'tec with an interest in philosophy and art. Regarded with suspicion by his colleagues, he refuses to buy into a culture of police dishonesty which, the movie suggests, is not merely endemic but actively encouraged. Bloody-minded in the extreme, Serpico gradually turns his attention away from the street and onto the precinct, blowing the whistle on institutional corruption. Such dedication to duty gets him shot, possibly by a fellow officer.

As with so much of director Sidney Lumet's work, it's a powerful evocation of time and place, and the film goes a long way in channelling the sense of disaffection and anti-authoritarianism felt throughout Nixon's America. At its heart is the David and Goliath tale of one man taking on the system and though the conclusion is bleak, Lumet's stylish direction, insightful writing by Waldo Salt (*Midnight Cowboy*) and the powerful presence of Pacino himself make for a stirring and impassioned drama.

Verdict

He fought the law and the law won, but Pacino's powerful, nuanced performance elevates this gritty cop drama into the realm of tragedy. Memorable, thought-provoking and courageous.

The Offence**113 minutes****United Kingdom (1973)***starring Sean Connery , Trevor Howard , John Hallam , Peter Bowles , Vivian Merchant , Ian Bannan , Derek Newark**written by John Hopkins**directed by Sidney Lumet*

One of Lumet's great movies, and usually overlooked, but one that is worth searching out to see for the psychological drama and a compelling performance from Connery. He is a police officer brutalized by the horrors he's seen and when he is faced by Bannen, a sly suspect in a child molestation case, he snaps. Retreating from whatever support his meek wife Merchant offers, Connery becomes increasingly violent in his questioning of Bannen, despite being investigated by Howard for corrupt police practices. Although the story has become a staple of films and TV police dramas since this, it still hasn't been done quite so well. An excellent original.

The Anderson Tapes**98 minutes****United States (1971)****15***starring Sean Connery , Christopher Walken , Ralph Meeker , Martin Balsam , Dyan Cannon , Alan King**written by Frank R Pierson**directed by Sidney Lumet*

Sean Connery takes a break from Bond for a groovy, pacy heist thriller with prescient surveillance-society overtones

Before launching upon his acclaimed run of films in the late Seventies, Sidney Lumet crafted this classic paranoid thriller. With *Serpico*, *Dog Day Afternoon* and *Network* just around the corner, Lumet took Sean Connery (fresh from abandoning Bond) and cast him as a recently released master burglar, who moves into Dyan Cannon's plush Manhattan apartment block. Planning to rob the other residents, he doesn't realise that, by chance, all his moves and plans are being recorded and observed by a range of devices. He is being scrupulously watched, and not just by the police. A fresh faced Christopher Walken stars as Connery's sidekick.

Not as artful as Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation*, but still an entertaining caper concerned with current anxieties about voyeurism and surveillance.