

Movie Review: "Perfect Stranger"™

by Arthur Salm

When Matthew Broderick hacked into his high school's computer system in "WarGames" and changed Ally Sheedy's biology grade, it was downright thrilling: There was Broderick, hunched over the keyboard, Sheedy peering over his shoulder. Close-up on the keys! All that mysterious tap-tap-tapping! On his screen, a blinking cursor moved to the D; a tap of a key, and it became a B.

'PERFECT STRANGER' - Halle Berry plays a dangerous game of cat-and-mouse with suspected killer Bruce Willis in the suspense drama 'Perfect Stranger.' CNS Photo courtesy of Barry Wetcher. Then - and this was kind of romantic - another tap, and she had an A! Yowza!

Of course, that was 1983, just about a quarter of a century ago. Any current thriller that relies on juice from, say, a best-friend geek tap-tap-tapping - my god, but that gets tiresome - and suddenly declaring "I'm in!" or some such triumphant declaration of a firewall breach is, invariably, way low on data in its IDEAS basket.

Take "Perfect Stranger," a Halle Berry-Bruce Willis vehicle fresh as a Commodore 64. Berry is Rowena, ace investigative reporter for the New York Courier, whose latest story, which uncovered corruption and worse involving a U.S. senator, just got killed, so she's quit in one of those huffs. How she's going to pay the rent on an Upper West Side apartment that would do a multimillionaire proud doesn't seem to concern her - in part, to be fair, because Grace (Nicki Aycox), an old friend from childhood, also just got killed.

Rowena vows to nab the killer, who very well may be Harrison Hill (Bruce Willis), powerful head of an advertising agency with top-of-the-line clients such as Victoria's Secret and Reebok, for whom he perhaps arranges shameless product placement in movies like, say, "Perfect Stranger."

A serial philanderer, Hill had been going hot and heavy with Grace, who may have tried to blackmail him. With the help of her Courier colleague, Miles (Giovanni Ribisi) - see best-friend geek, above - she engages in sexy Internet chat with Hill. Then, before you can say "WarGames," Miles and his trusty keyboard get her a temp job at Hill's agency, where she sashays his way, catches his eye, and before long is executing a pas de deux with the boss while looking for an opening to get to the files in his office computer.

Tap-tap-tap!

The twists and turns of the plot are redolent with overripe red herrings, or, more in the spirit of things, overpriced sushi. "Perfect Stranger" glides on glitz; we drift past highest-end parties and knockout digs and beautiful people like a glob of yutzes on a moving sidewalk gawking at the swells in a series of chichi dioramas.

Director James Foley's pace is about as varied as a moving sidewalk's; tension is permanently set at about 7 on a scale of 10, achieves maybe a 2, then plods along glumly. It doesn't even help that just about every character but Rowena is a creep. Todd Komarnicki's screenplay hammers home tendentious points about identity, and shoehorns in some back story, via flashback, intended as explanation for the final preposterous surprise. That it may tie the thing together doesn't mean it isn't claptrap. Whatever joke Willis, who mostly appears smug, is in on isn't apparent; maybe it's Berry herself, so ravished by the camera that she looks better after having just thrown up (the morgue scene) than anyone else on the planet, most of whom, one assumes, have not just thrown up. Even those who've just seen "Perfect Stranger."

RATINGS 4 STARS - Excellent. 3 STARS - Worthy. 2 STARS - Mixed. 1 STAR - Poor. 0 - Forget It (a dog) A Columbia Pictures and Revolution Studios release. Director: James Foley. Writer: Todd Komarnicki. Cast: Halle Berry, Bruce Willis, Giovanni Ribisi, Nicki Aycox. Running time: 1 hour, 49 minutes. Rated R. 1 star.

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