

Movie Review: 'Sleuth'

by David_Elliott

There isn't much point in remaking Anthony Shaffer's stage hit "Sleuth," filmed with very busy stagecraft in 1972 by Joseph Mankiewicz.

'SLEUTH' - Jude Law gets to oppose Michael Caine in the role once played by Caine in Kenneth Branagh's frosty remake of 'Sleuth.' CNS Photo courtesy of David Appleby. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.)

Proof: Kenneth Branagh's remake, the Shaffer play partly gutted, the rehabby Harold Pinter.

No talents better sum up modern British theater than Pinter and Branagh. But they've made a movie. As such, "Sleuth" is like being stuck in a cold locker for preserved hams: Michael Caine as rich, snobbish writer Andrew Wyke, and Jude Law as actor Milo Tindle, who seduced Wyke's wife and is invited to the estate for drastic comeuppance.

In the 1972 movie, Caine was the Italo-English Tindle, lured into lurid traps by Laurence Olivier's Wyke. The brittle, nervy fun of that film was less in Shaffer's arch stage tricks and fancy verbiage, which put a cynical spin on Agatha Christie mysteries, than in Olivier chewing the florid decor with his showboating jests and games. Caine, to the surprise of many, matched him with a less showy form of payback.

Caine is now 74, and the close-ups of his hands (more than his face) are forlornly revealing. His Wyke is a tired, suavely sadistic weirdo. He lives in an impersonally postmodern home so sterile and metallic that it hardly seems fit for anything except an absurdly expensive trap for a posturing fly like Tindle.

Pinter has kept some plot contortions, like the silly jewel heist. He has highlighted the sadism and envy (of wealth by one man, of youth by the other). And he steams into fuller view the erotic subtext. "The big one's mine," preens Wyke at the start, talking about his car, thus opening a Freudian face-off in which a cigar is far more than a cigar (and the woman in dispute is not even a cigar band).

At 34, Jude Law remains too pretty to fully texture a role in which he is baited as a mere "hairdresser." Later, he postures being a pettish boy-toy who slithers onto Wyke's bed like a cat in heat. Suddenly, we seem to be leaving "Sleuth" for "Staircase," in which Rex Harrison and Richard Burton poofed and prissed like mad (also, like dumb).

Branagh's technique is fluent, fancy and vacuous. Pinter, even more than Shaffer, is a noted master of the stiletto line, but his "Sleuth" is never witty enough to justify its nagging nastiness. The characters seem made for each other, perhaps, yet hardly for any human audience.

A lot of talent came together to provide us that rare and saddest gift of British theater to Americans: a bore. No gift for Brits, also.

A Sony Pictures Classics release. Director: Kenneth Branagh. Writer: Harold Pinter. Cast: Michael Caine, Jude Law. Running time: 1 hour, 28 minutes. Rated R. 2 stars.

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