

## DEATH AND THE MAIDEN

Hollywood has recently come to the conclusion that all erotic thrillers must feature the ever impressive graphic sex scene. In such recent films as *Basic Instinct*, *Body of Evidence*, and *Bad Company* acrobatics and orgasm seem to go hand in hand. The stars are excessively beautiful, sweat pours out of them as if they are dispensing tap water, and the positions their bodies attain defy all laws of Newton and Einstein. Amidst all the glitz and shlock comes *Death and the Maiden*, an erotic thriller to be sure and one in which the graphic sex scene moves to a new level for not one of the stars remove their clothes.

Paulina Escobar (Sigourney Weaver) is the executor of these psycho-sexually tense scenes. Her target is Dr. Roberto Miranda (Ben Kingsley) who spends most of the movie as Paulina's prisoner in her seaside South American home. Paulina believes that Miranda is the very person who raped and tortured her on fourteen separate occasions many years before, each time playing Schubert's "Death and the Maiden" in the background. Her unsuspecting husband Gerardo (Stuart Wilson) is aghast at what his wife accuses this seemingly respectable man of. In a role-reversal that's sure to generate discussions at office water coolers, Paulina puts Miranda on trial in an attempt to force a confession out of him. Tying him to a chair with duct tape and a lamp cord and gagging him with ladies' underwear, the verbally abusive Paulina subjects Miranda to degradation and humiliation. Paulina casts Gerardo in the role of attorney to Miranda, despite her husband's uncertainty as to whom he should believe.

*Death and the Maiden* takes its time to reach the full revisionist phase of its seemingly run-of-the-mill exploitation setup. The director, Roman Polanski, fills the first fifteen minutes with endless homages to Hitchcock, an opening tracking shot inside Paulina's house, where most of the film takes place, and a car crashing to its demise over a cliff seems to promise a more graphic version of Hitchcock's own, *Rope*. Yet as soon as the camera restricts itself and the characters to the seaside house, Polanski gives the film its own perverse and voyeuristic quality. Paulina is not just attempting to out a confession from Miranda, she is also trying to relive the very ordeal he put her through. Replaying a tape of "Death and the Maiden" on a cheap stereo, spitting out obscenities, and walking with more than a hint of sexual malice, Sigourney Weaver's characterization of Paulina is probably one of the most vivid and haunting portraits ever of a sane psychotic. When Paulina describes to Gerardo the extent of her torture, being blindfolded and having an electric shock mechanism placed inside her are among the more stomach churning, the audience feels sympathy for what she has been through and, in a perverse twist that only a director like Polanski could achieve, cheers when Paulina suggests such insane methods of torture as raping Miranda with a broomstick.

As Miranda, Ben Kingsley gives a phenomenal performance that should earn this underused actor more attention. Kingsley reveals Miranda slowly to us, layer by layer. He progresses from the weak-tongued Miranda of the first reel to the near psychotic one of the third with unbelievable ease, though where most films would end with that last persona as Miranda's final characterization, *Death and the Maiden* allows him a final speech of such truthfulness and hurt that it will destroy any preconceived notions one had of Miranda up until that point. This is the first erotic thriller in a long time where the villain actually generates some audience sympathy.

In what could surely become the upstaged role, Stuart Wilson plays the caring but detached husband of Paulina, Gerardo. At the start it seems that Gerardo is no more than an uptight politician, an innocent pawn in a sick and twisted game. Yet the events between Miranda and Paulina force Gerardo to re-evaluate his values and become a true, caring husband in the process. It is the King Lear of supporting roles but Wilson pulls it off brilliantly with a certain charisma and panache that draws as much attention to him as to the two leading players.

What pulls it all together is Roman Polanski's direction. He has no doubt drawn on some of his own experiences in the making of *Death and the Maiden*. The scenes between Miranda and Paulina give an almost restrained envisioning of the Manson-Tate murders and the psycho-sexual torture sequences are no doubt drawn from Polanski's run-in with the law over his encounter with a thirteen-year old girl. Polanski is working with stage material here, one of the screenwriters, Ariel Dorfman, penned the original stage version, but he brings a life to the material that only the movies could achieve. Not once after those first fifteen minutes does Polanski let us off this silent roller coaster, and when we reach the end we are breathless and drained, but filled with an exhilaration that we didn't even know was there. Polanski has re-envisioned the Hollywood erotic thriller in such a fresh and exciting fashion with *Death and the Maiden*. Isn't it wonderful when we can come out of a movie remembering more than just the actors' flexible lower halves?