



THE PLEDGE

Sean Penn is one of the few dependably downbeat figures in American film, and those who like their dramas moody, atmospheric, and richly detailed will get some initial pleasure with *The Pledge*

Mr. Penn's third directorial outing.

Jack Nicholson plays Jerry Black, a cop on the verge of retirement who goes to work on one last case, the sexual mutilation and murder of a little girl whose killing is reminiscent of the deaths of other girls in the area. Black becomes obsessed with uncovering the killer, so much so that he purchases a dilapidated gas station near the murder sites and, shockingly, begins to use the daughter of a coffee-shop waitress (Robin Wright Penn) as bait to catch the murderer. Penn attacks his film as obsessively as Black pursues the killer, using silence and rich visuals to give the film a terrifying, anything-can-happen feel, and Nicholson comes through with a first-rate interpretation of a man slowly losing his mind. Slow-going though it is, *The Pledge's* first hour is truly hypnotic.

But after that, the film seems to lose its way, and we're left with a meandering series of set pieces: endless scenes of Black fishing, reading to the little girl, staring at potential suspects, looking out his dirty windows with faraway detachment. Nicholson is always fascinating to watch, but it becomes apparent that the whys and wherefores of the murder aren't of much interest to Penn; he's more concerned with the effect of the crimes on the Black character, and we begin to care less and less about how the story will unfold. About the only thing that keeps you alert is the series of outstanding character actors that Penn keeps throwing in, presumably to keep our attention. In addition to Wright Penn, Aaron Eckhart, Sam Shepard, and Patricia Clarkson in supporting roles, *The Pledge* offers one-scene-only vignettes to the likes of Benicio Del Toro (amazing as an early suspect in the killings), Vanessa Redgrave, Helen Mirren, Harry Dean Stanton, Lois Smith, Mickey Rourke, and Costas Mandylor – it's like *The Player* as directed by a somnabulist.

And like many a recent film, the ending is a complete cheat; Penn might almost be mocking us for hoping for a satisfying wrap-up. *The Pledge* has sensational moments but remains a

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frustrating, draining experience, and even the basic plot reveals itself to be disappointing; it turns out the murders could have been averted if only the kids learned not to accept candy from strangers.



THE GIFT

You'll really have to search to find acting as spectacularly terrible as Giovanni Ribisi's work in Sam Raimi's Southern-gothic *The Gift*. Playing a backwoods mechanic who befriends psychic Annie Wilson (Cate Blanchett), a woman trying to solve the murder of the town tramp (Katie Holmes), Ribisi's performance consists of a series of tics, shrieks, mumbles, and fey, open-mouthed stares, and it's all so hideously over-the-top that you'd laugh your head off at his antics if it didn't leave you so dumbfounded. Ribisi can be a fine actor – he's done wonderful work in

subUrbia and *Saving Private Ryan*, and is a

comic joy every time he appears on TV's

Friends

– but you just feel embarrassed for him in

The Gift

. Sadly, though, he might be on to something; the rest of this by-the-numbers thriller is so formulaic that he's the one element of the film that, awful as he is, remains unpredictable.

That predictability applies to Raimi's direction, as well. Though the script, by Billy Bob Thornton and Tom Epperson, trots out one Southern-gothic cliché after another, you'd at least hope that Raimi, who has yet to give *Evil Dead*-like vivacity to a Hollywood project, would provide some vitality. But except for an exceedingly creepy, sped-up shot of a backwoods fiddler, the "scares" here have all been done to death: characters accidentally backing into people they didn't know were behind them, ghostly visions of corpses, and of course, the over-extended sequence of Annie in danger as the murderer explains his/her rationale for killing the little hussy. Cate Blanchett does what she can with a sketchy role, but has to spend far too much time looking spooked and anguished (it's the same fate that befell Michelle Pfeiffer in

What Lies Beneath

), and the film wastes the talents of Greg Kinnear, Michael Jeter, Rosemary Harris, and J.K. Simmons.

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It must be mentioned, though, that *The Gift* does provide a few laughs beyond those that Giovanni Ribisi gives us, and they come courtesy of Keanu Reeves, playing a wife-beater to Hilary Swank's tremulous victim. Though he looks good in the role, with a scruffy beard and baseball cap, as soon as he opens his mouth you have no choice but to giggle; it's sweet that he's trying to extend his range, but Reeves just can't get rid of his laid-back dude-ness, and only in a world as gonzo as the one in *The Gift* could Keanu Reeves ever be considered anything of a threat to Hilary Swank, who could smack him on the head with her Oscar and leave him for dead.



SUGAR & SPICE

I know they aren't exactly writing Medeas and Hedda Gablers for the under-20 set, but surely Mena Suvari deserves better than the vulgar, unfunny *Sugar & Spice*. Beyond her sensational work in *American Beauty*, Miss Suvari was one of the few performers who actually resembled a human being in *American Pie*, and the only one who did so in last summer's *Loser*, but her naturalistic gifts are completely wasted in this laborious farce about cheerleaders who decide to rob a bank. After you get past the zippy opening-credits sequence, everything about director Francine McDougall's work is overscaled and obvious, and if you focus on Suvari's tough-gal character throughout the film – and there's not much else to watch – you can tell that she knows the material is beneath her, too.

The movie has one great idea that is left maddeningly undeveloped: The cheerleaders decide to watch videotapes of bank-heist movies to learn from the characters' mistakes, taking notes on such films as *Dog Day Afternoon*, *Reservoir Dogs*, *Heat*, and even *The Apple Dumpling Gang*. But instead of incorporating elements from those films into their own heist, the girls simply decide that there's actually nothing they can learn from them, and the idea is dropped; this doesn't point out the girls' dopiness as much as it does the laziness of screenwriter Mandy Nelson.

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Sugar & Spice also wastes the natural charm of James Marsden and Marley Shelton, but there is one surprising bright side: the notorious Sean Young, playing Mena Suvari's prison-inmate mom, shows a flair for low comedy, and her scenes with Suvari are the film's best. It's still not worth sitting through *Sugar & Spice* to catch them, but they're the only aspects of this tired teen romp that have any flavor whatsoever.