

On Screen

Low Laughs & Low Life

HIGH ANXIETY, starring Mel Brooks, Madeline Kahn, Harvey Korman, Cloris Leachman. Produced and directed by Brooks.

In *High Anxiety* Mel Brooks, so he says, salutes Alfred Hitchcock, the master of suspense. Well, Hitchcock has withstood everything from 1930's censorship to 1970's semiology and he will, no doubt, survive Brooks' heavy-breathing, but the question is — will audiences? Every laugh *High Anxiety* elicits from an audience seems one more nail in the coffin of American comedy. Right now, except for *Annie Hall*, most of our film humor is in ridiculing others, a manic preoccupation with the comedy of cruelty.

Brooks often veers dangerously close to this kind of humor — the kick-'em-in-the-stomach-when-they're-down school of retching excess — but in the past, he also infused his films with a wistful absurdity that let us take the highs with the lows. Now even that subtlety is totally missing and Brooks comes on with the finesse of a steam-roller.

In *High Anxiety* Brooks plays a psychiatrist with a secret problem who is brought in to head a mysterious hospital for The Very Very Nervous. Strange goings-on happen at the clinic and the plot revolves around Brooks discovering the truth. Along the way we're treated to short "takes" on all of Hitchcock's most famous films, including the shower scene from *Psycho*, the waterfront scene from *Vertigo* (shot at the same location) as well as devices from such non-Hitchcock films as *Blow-Up* and a reference to the curtain crisis from *Cobweb*, a movie

about a mental institution that incidentally was written by William Gibson who incidentally wrote *Two for the Seesaw* which incidentally made a star of Anne Bancroft who is incidentally Mrs. Mel Brooks.

One of the most annoying faults of *High Anxiety* (aside from listening to people around you proclaim the Hitchcock movie now being parodied) is its total lack of suspense. Of what value is a Hitchcock tribute without suspense? We know everything there is to know about the hospital and its madmen far too early; getting to the end isn't even half the fun. Some inventive moments like the use of strange camera angles are repeated so often that their impact disintegrates before our eyes.

Another major problem is Brooks himself in the lead. He's not a particularly sympathetic man (as Woody Allen innately is) and he can't project, on screen, the charisma he displays off screen. His Thorndyke is never really part of the action; we keep waiting for him to call "cut." Also Madeline Kahn, trying to be a cool blonde à la Grace Kelly and Tippi Hedren, is simply miscast and unattractive. Cloris Leachman and Harvey Korman as a sadistic couple are fine — if you like that sort of thing.

There's a popular story about Brooks, that he goes to theatres where his movies are playing and counts the laughs. He's looking for the pinnacle — where it's all one big laugh. He comes close to it in *High Anxiety*, but the laughs are cheap. He might do well to remember that even in comedy, silence can occasionally be golden.

Jacoba Atlas

Brooks and Kahn: Witless, weak & warped.



Travolta:
Smoking, sizzling &
steaming.

SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER, starring John Travolta and Karen Lynn Gorney; written by Norman Wexler (based on a story by Nik Cohn), directed by John Badham.

At long last. Someone has finally made a rock and roll movie with all the excitement of the music and dancing, but without the cloying condescension and moribund morality.

The music, most of it written and sung by rock's British castrati, the Bee Gees, has a raw narrative intensity unlike the group's usually insipid hits. We have Robert Stigwood to thank for much of this movie — he produced it, and the music is released on his RSO label, and it's the first time I'm forced to admit the wily entrepreneur may have taste after all. It was Stigwood, remember, who perpetrated, with director Ken Russell, the abomination of *Tommy*.

John Travolta, (nicknamed by some of us John Revolting for his Barbarino character on TV's *Welcome Back, Kotter*) is no less than flawless in his first big screen starring role. He plays Tony Manero, king of the discos, a narcissistic young man full of ignorance but little bliss who marks time all week in a humdrum job and suffocating family until, one night a week, he reigns on the dance floor. Tony is prodded gradually into realizing a better life exists, an awakening speeded by his brother, who leaves the priesthood, and a young woman (Karen Lynn Gorney) who is trying to better herself with a job and apartment in Manhattan. She even tries to clean up her Brooklyn accent.

Bay Ridge, an all-white section of Brooklyn, is the background, an area whose inhabitants, like Tony, seem well enough off — no rats in the alleys here — but can't get out of the lower middle class vise. The realistic street scenes are in vivid contrast to the almost ethereal disco scenes, where the dancers appear suspended in clouds, moving in perfect rhythm with each other, while

outside, in cars, there is casual grasping sex without tenderness.

There is no affection anywhere in this film. Tony is abused by his family, exploited by his job, and in turn he abuses women with casual, easy arrogance. They don't seem to mind.

Director Badham has a hit and a near miss to his credit: the excellent TV film *The Law*, and the pleasant but ineffectual movie, *The Bingo Long Traveling All Stars and Motor Kings*. In *Saturday Night Fever* Badham saunters confidently across a tightrope — very few directors could combine a gang bang, a gang fight, and modern, Macho Fred Astaire-Ginger Rogers falling-in-love-while-dancing sequence in the same movie . . . and make it all believable. Until the end, which isn't very believable, but by then I was so transfixed I didn't care about reality.

The script, by Norman Wexler (who wrote *Joe* and *Serpico*) is tough and gritty, but some of the characters are all too familiar, especially the desperate young man searching for someone to tell him *not* to marry the girl he got pregnant. He has "Doomed" written all over him.

Another scene, although nicely played, has Travolta extolling the particulars of the Verrazano Bridge to Gorney. Perhaps it's supposed to prove that even an ignorant street kid knows a lot about *something*. The bridge, of course, is a Symbol.

But none of the film's several faults matter that much; what will be remembered about this one is Travolta. He plumbs the same violent sexual undercurrents as Marlon Brando playing Stanley Kowalski; at any minute Travolta could explode and take everything with him. He's dynamite — looking for a match.

The kid is a real star. And just when we needed one, too.

Judith Sims