

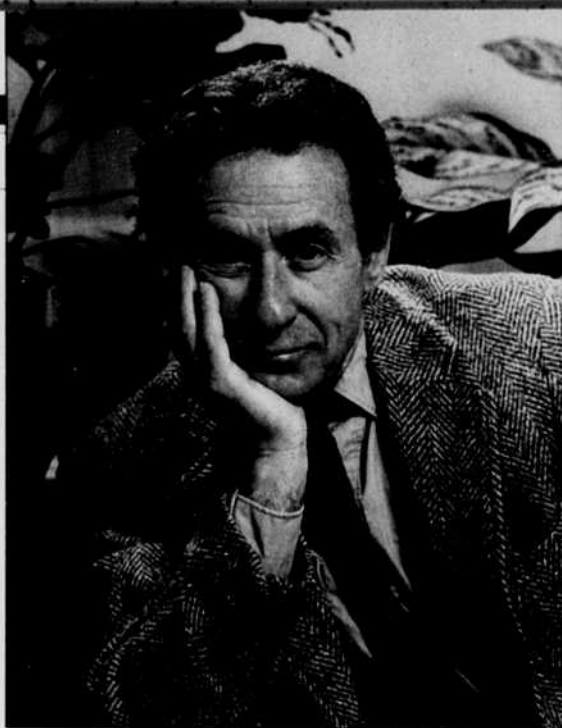
MOVIES

A Classic of Movie Suspense

Chills from Arthur Penn

For most of his filmmaking career, Arthur Penn has made a convention of unconventionality. Nearly every movie he's directed goes against the grain, from "Bonnie and Clyde," with its antihero heroics, to "Little Big Man," with its antimyth mythic tall tales. Penn's need to tinker with accepted forms and techniques—what he calls "the perverse aspect of my nature"—has given his best films added richness and texture. Even his failures have been interesting because of his eclectic, highly personal way with a story. And now, in his 12th feature film, "Dead of Winter," Arthur Penn has confounded expectations again by making what looks like his most straightforward—and commercial—movie in years. "Dead of Winter" has all the taut elegance and chilling impact of Hitchcock at his best. Says Penn, "Dead of Winter" has exercised that part of me that is a showman."

In a sense, Penn has gone back to basics to rebuild his career. "One of the things that one experiences when you reach my age," says Penn, 64, "is that you have to re-establish your credentials. People only look back at your last couple of films." In Penn's case, that short-term view isn't wonderful. Over the past decade he's directed only two films, and neither of those did particularly well. Since "The Missouri Breaks" came out in 1976 and was a critical bellyflop, Penn has made only "Four Friends," which came out in 1981 to mixed reviews and a poor box-office response, and "Target," a fall 1985 movie which was a modest success with reviewers and moviegoers. During these years Penn worked as a director on some stage theatrical projects, taught a semester at Yale and spent some time with his family. "I made up my mind to be around the house for a while," he explains.



JACQUES M. CHENET—NEWSWEEK

A conventional film from an unconventional director: Penn

With "Dead of Winter" Penn's family has repaid the favor. Son Matthew brought the script to Penn on behalf of two classmates from Wesleyan University, Mark Malone and Marc Shmuger. "When I read the script," Penn says, "I thought the plot was ingenious and rather brilliantly worked out. There's a kind of elegance to the story that I particularly liked." Essentially a three-character drama, "Dead of Winter" shows an out-of-work New York actress, Katie McGovern (Mary Steenburgen), traveling to a remote upstate mansion for a film audition. But when she meets the film's "producer" (Jan Rubes) and his assistant (Roddy McDowall), they draw her unknowingly into a dangerous scheme involving extortion, mutilation and murder. "Once we've identified with her character," says Penn, "then the web of circumstances grows incredibly much tighter, tighter and tighter."



MGM

Genteel, but creepy: Mary Steenburgen in 'Dead of Winter'

Once McGovern arrives for her audition, the mansion is socked in by a winter blizzard which ostensibly knocks out phone service. Even after she suspects her employers, there is nowhere for her to run. Adding to the creepy quality of the film is the genteel quality of her captors. After she knows, and they know she knows, and she tries unsuccessfully to escape into the storm, they bring her back and give her a warming mug of drugged hot chocolate. As she warily drinks away, they ask, with exceeding politeness, "Miss McGovern, something more to drink, some more hot chocolate? Hmmm?" The physically violent plot turns of "Dead of Winter" are handled with a delicacy that is equally bloodless and chilling. Ironically, Penn was once blamed for

inspiring a generation of excessively violent filmmakers with "Bonnie and Clyde"; now he believes it is time to "back away from such explicitness."

"Dead of Winter" is the first thriller Penn has directed in any medium since he did "Wait Until Dark" on Broadway in 1966. That was during a time when Penn had five hit shows running simultaneously on Broadway, including "Two for the Seesaw" and "The Miracle Worker." "I didn't know what a flop was," he remembers wistfully.

'Coitus interruptus': After Penn directed "The Miracle Worker" successfully for TV and the stage, it became his second movie, and a much more satisfying project than the first, a 1958 Billy-the-Kid movie that starred a young Paul Newman. After shooting "The Left-Handed Gun," Penn was told by Warner Bros. that his services were no longer needed and that editors

would put the movie together. "That just threw me," says Penn. "It was sort of like *coitus interruptus*." Later, after the studio era ended, Penn typified the more powerful independent director, who gained complete creative control over his movies at one point—clout he now says that nobody but Steven Spielberg can still exercise.

And so he has traveled from studio pro to revered iconoclast and back again. It's a career filled with triumphs and tempered with a few disasters. It would make a terrific movie—and the perfect director is available.

RON GIVENS