

# Role Reversal

A quick game of cat and mouse

**SLEUTH:** Directed by Kenneth Branagh. Written by Harold Pinter, based on the play by Anthony Shaffer. Cinematography, Haris Zambarloukos. Production design, Tim Harvey. Music, Patrick Doyle. Starring Michael Caine and Jude Law. Sony Pictures Classics, 2007. R. 86 minutes. ★★☆☆☆

It's not just a game within the movie, this new version of *Sleuth*; it's a game outside the film to try to track who's playing which roles and who *already* played those roles. Michael Caine, see, is playing Andrew Wyke, the crime novelist who invites his wife's lover out to his country estate, but in 1972, Caine played Milo Tindle, the young actor (or is it hairdresser?), then visiting Laurence Olivier as Wyke (I've not yet watched this version, but oh, I plan to). But there's more: In 1966, Michael Caine played the lead in *Alfie*, which was

remade in 2004 (don't worry; no one else saw it, either) starring Jude Law.

On the other hand, neither director Kenneth Branagh nor screenwriter Harold Pinter — adapting Anthony Shaffer's play — had anything, so far as I can tell, to do with any of those movies. But knowledge of the tangle of twice-played roles may add something to the impression that this new version of *Sleuth* is in large part a very enjoyable actors' workshop in which Caine and Law enthusiastically explore each other's reactions, limits and considerable abilities while Branagh allows things



Jude Law in *Sleuth*

to get quite stagey at times. The occasional closeup on a face (or part of a face) serves to remind us that we are not, in fact, watching a play that happens to have an extraordinary single set, but a film with a great love of gizmos and gusto.

At just 86 minutes long, *Sleuth* is a taut, entertaining game of cat and mouse in which neither the cat nor the mouse is quite sure which he is. At first, Caine's got the

upper hand; it's his absurdly automated house at which Law arrives (an amusing running joke, though it may not be meant to be a joke at all, is that Wyke controls everything in his house with a tiny Mac remote; it's impossible for the device's few buttons to do so much). But after Wyke puts Tindle through his frightened paces, the younger man can't let go of his humiliation. The tables turn, and turn again, leaving the audience to wonder exactly how Tindle got himself into this situation, how Wyke got such a strange notion in his head, and what Maggie — who is never seen in person, but whose figure hovers in the background in the form of a photo and a mannequin — had to do with it. With an ending both ambiguous and definite, *Sleuth* invites a certain amount of post-film speculation, though not *too* much; this is mostly an excuse to enjoy Caine and Law as they glower and spar.

*Sleuth* opens Friday, Dec. 7, at the Bijou.

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