

Movies

'Moonlighting': A solid piece of work by director

By Gene Siskel

Movie critic

JERZY SKOLIMOWSKI'S "Moonlighting" is a great film.

What a pleasure it is to see it selected as the opening attraction for Chicago's newest movie theater, the Fine Arts, 418 S. Michigan Ave., the site of the old Studebaker Theater. Quality films downtown is a fresh idea; we haven't had classy bookings in the Loop since the days, a decade ago, of the late, great Clark Theater. More about the Fine Arts theaters later in this column.

"Moonlighting" is an extraordinary piece of filmmaking that reminds us of the director's craft. I haven't seen such exciting direction in quite some time.

Many critics are regarding "Moonlighting" as a political parable by director Skolimowski, commenting on the inhumanity of the Soviet Union's crackdown on the Polish Solidarity labor movement. To be sure, it is that. But that sentiment can be expressed in a sentence: You don't need film. What makes "Moonlighting" so refreshing is that it works on the gut level of a thriller.

THE STORY is this. Four Polish workers, led by a foreman named Nowak (Jeremy Irons), arrive in England carrying a huge quantity of tools and £1,200. Their mission is to rehab a house purchased by a wealthy Pole. By using Polish labor, he can finish the house for one-quarter of the English labor cost. What's in it for the workers is the equivalent of a year's pay in their native Poland for only one month's work.

Now, a lot of this movie is about the indoor reconstruction of this house, and you are probably thinking that this isn't your kind of movie. You don't even bother with "This Old House" on PBS.

But don't underestimate the power of a talented filmmaker. Filming in a quick four weeks because of a shortage of funds, Skolimowski picks up every scene late in the action and drives the movie along without being frantic. He uses what I like to call "silent" edits—with very little natural sound on the soundtrack, the action just pops along, from working inside the house on one floor, up to another floor and then outside. Pop, pop, pop. It's mesmerizing. "Moonlighting" is one of the most



Tribune photo by Charles Osgood

Fine Arts Theaters open Saturday with a fine selection of foreign films.

"Moonlighting"

★★★★

Mini-review: Of bosses and men

Written and directed by Jerzy Skolimowski; photographed by Tony Pierce Roberia; edited by Barrie Vince; music by Stanley Myers; production design by Tony Woolford; produced by Mark Shivas and Skolimowski; a Universal release at the Fine Arts Theater, 418 S. Michigan Ave. Rated PG.

powerful, predominantly quiet films ever made.

The political angle of the story involves the character of Nowak the foreman, played by Irons, who was last seen opposite Meryl Streep in "The French Lieutenant's Woman." It is difficult to recognize him here. What happens is that Nowak begins to enjoy his role as foreman and becomes quite a tyrant withholding information about the political situation in Poland, censoring mail and generally imitating the Communist regime.

His character isn't a total background, though; this is a much too sophisticated film for that. Much time is spent on following Nowak as he attempts to provide for his crew of workers by stealing food from a supermarket. These scenes are worthy of Hitchcock.

Chief among the pleasures is the documentary-

like feel of the scenes involving the three workmen. Only midway through the movie does it cross your mind that these men are actors; they are utterly convincing as laborers—stolid, intense, craftsmanlike. At the same time they have a childlike innocence. It may sound strange, but in their own way they are as appealing as E.T.

Irons' performance is impeccable: The tension in his body language energizes the film. "Moonlighting" is an English language film, consisting mostly of Nowak's halting English narration, and that means that Irons qualifies for an Academy Award nomination as best actor. He's got my vote for a nomination.

FILM NOTE: The opening of the Fine Arts theaters [the Fine Arts 2 is on the site of the adjoining World Playhouse] is a bold adventure being undertaken by M&R Theaters of Skokie, building on the excellence of its Near North Side Sandburg Theater. Top-quality art films will play in both the Fine Arts 1 and 2. [See adjoining review of "Veronika Voss" at the Fine Arts 2.] Ticket prices will be \$4.50, with a bargain \$2 admission before 6 p.m. on weekdays and for the first show on Saturday and Sunday. Admission for senior citizens is \$2.50 at all times.