

## FILM REVIEW

# A Man With Troubles and a Low Integrity Quotient

By JANET MASLIN

Dennis Hopper plays the violin; John Turturro looks like Tiny Tim; Martin Scorsese audits tax returns, and Christopher Walken sings "Red River Valley." These are among the fringe benefits of "Search and Destroy," a hollow but crazily arresting film version of Howard Korder's play. Handsomely directed for the screen by the artist David Salle, the film makes sure its audience will concentrate on bold colors, striking juxtapositions and over-the-top performances rather than on anything being said. Rampant cynicism is its subject, and the film itself may be an object lesson in that regard.

Directed more sparsely on stage, Mr. Korder's play presented quacks and hustlers caught up in the conniving that made a movie producer out of Martin Mirkheim, a flailing would-be entrepreneur. (His project was aptly called "Dead World.") That premise then had resonance as a microcosm of moral decline, but now it's just the pretext for stylish,

absurdist encounters staged with unexpected dash. It's not necessary to embrace this film's precepts to sense that Mr. Salle is exhilarated by movie making and his actors are having a good time.

The star is Griffin Dunne, reprising his stage role as the sleazy Mirkheim with mischievous panache. Mr. Dunne makes a good Everyman for the era of opportunism that this film describes, shiftily-eyed yet convinced of his own integrity. He's forced to get off that integrity and get rolling once a government auditor (Mr. Scorsese) finds him heavily in debt, and his wife (Rosanna Arquette) finds other fault with him. Circumstance then brings Mirkheim to an audience with Dr. Luthor Waxling (Dennis Hopper), a novelist and self-help guru with the power to change Mirkheim's life. Or at least make it more lucrative.

Mirkheim has become wildly inspired by "Daniel Strong," the novel by Waxling that is seen here in occasional rustic glimpses and pompous, piquant excerpts. (Sculpturing a torso with a nude model in the wilder-

ness: "Daniel Strong tests himself against the power of beauty.") He sees in the book exactly the sort of lofty popular wisdom that could make for a hit movie. (This idea would seem more droll if "The Bridges of Madison County" weren't just over the horizon.)

Unfortunately, financial considerations hobble Mirkheim, forcing him to turn his attentions to Marie (Ileana Douglas), Waxling's receptionist, who excitedly describes the unbelievably gruesome horror film she is writing. "Finally only Melanie is left," Marie types, working on her screenplay. "She is a fully realized, multidimensional character with huge breasts."

Through a series of equally improbable turns, the film moves on to Kim (Mr. Walken, with patent-leather hair), Ron (a madly speed-rapping Mr. Turturro) and assorted other miscreants, all of them embroiled in helping Mirkheim realize the creative potential of "Dead World." Eventually the story turns violent, despite its otherwise slight, satirical tone. As adapted for the

screen by Michael Almereyda, who is himself a director, "Search and Destroy" remains literate, precise and mocking without developing any particular gravity. A typical aphorism: "It's not your adventure but it's definitely your life."

Madly pretentious as it would be if given half a chance, and pointless as it becomes, "Search and Destroy" also sustains an improbable brightness. For instance, Ms. Douglas positively glows in her preposterous role, and it's admirable that neither she nor any of the other actors condescend to the material. Mr. Hopper is edgily good and all too credible as a television preacher. Ethan Hawke lurks nicely as his aide. Mr. Walken plays a dead-eyed businessman with his usual scary aplomb. (He can even give a sinister spin to a line like, "You spread a lovely buffet.") It's Mr. Turturro who gives the film's looniest performance. By the time he, Mr. Dunne and Mr. Walken have begun shouting at one another on a squash court, the whole enterprise is off the deep end.

Still, Mr. Salle shows he can be at

## SEARCH AND DESTROY

Directed by David Salle; written by Michael Almereyda, based on the play by Howard Korder; directors of photography, Bobby Bukowski and Michael Spiller; edited by Michelle Gorchow; music by Elmer Bernstein; production designer, Robin Standefer; produced by Ruth Charny, Dan Lupovitz and Ellie Cohn; released by October Films. Running time: 90 minutes. This film is rated R.

WITH: Griffin Dunne (Martin Mirkheim), Rosanna Arquette (Lauren Mirkheim), Ileana Douglas (Marie Davenport), Ethan Hawke (Roger), Dennis Hopper (Dr. Waxling), John Turturro (Ron), Martin Scorsese (the accountant) and Christopher Walken (Kim Ulander).



October Films

Griffin Dunne, left, and Dennis Hopper in "Search and Destroy."

home in this medium, using visual methods that are as striking as they are self-congratulatory. Stark, carefully chosen backdrops and strong primary colors capture the attention, and transitions are imaginatively made. His clean, minimalist compositions will look equally at home on the small screen some day, thanks especially to crisp cinema-

tography by Bobby Bukowski and Michael Spiller. And home audiences won't be as inclined to wonder what's the point.

"Search and Destroy" is rated R (Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian). It includes violence and brief frontal nudity.