

TREASURES FROM THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

AN ONGOING SERIES OF CLASSIC AND CONTEMPORARY FILMS PRESENTED IN 35MM BY THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 8
1 P.M. • HUMANITIES
QUADRANGLE
ALICE CINEMA

AND FILMS AT THE WHITNEY PRESENT TWO BY MICHAEL ROEMER

PRESENTED WITH SUPPORT FROM
PAUL L. JOSKOW '70 M.PHIL., '72 PH.D.

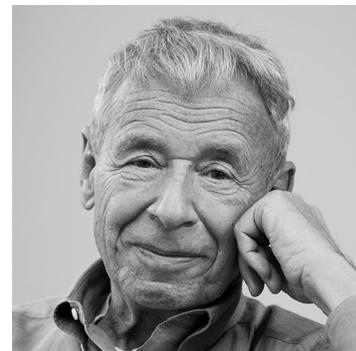


Michael Roemer's shape-shifting masterpiece, left to the opaque catacombs of '80s TV, but which, in another world, would have gotten as much praise and accolades as a film like Mike Leigh's *SECRETS AND LIES*, to which this film sports uncanny resemblances: the dissolution of a family over adoption, and dead time raised to an untapped level of musical elegance in a narrative film. Originally released as "Haunted," an episode on the third season of PBS's "American Playhouse" (the same season that premiered Bill Duke's "The Killing Floor," which also recently received a re-release), the effort to categorize *VENGEANCE IS MINE*—"It's Bergmanesque! It's Cassavetes! It's Altmanesque! It's a trauma caper!"—brings to mind United Artists' failed, clumsy effort to promote *THE NIGHT OF THE HUNTER* upon its initial 1955 release. How do you categorize something like this?

A sisters melodrama that would have once been dialed way up in the '40s—and starred Bette Davis with her scheming bulge of eyes—is dialed way back, in 1984, thanks to Brooke Adams and her low-key survivor's stare. It does something unprecedented, which an unimaginative mind will chalk up to frenetic, hasty plotting: it spends the first 40 minutes weaving together no fewer than ten different soap operatic narrative strands that have little immediate relation (we think) to the eleventh strand, which then becomes the key focus of the film: a situationship with the next-door neighbors that involves daughter abandonment, mental illness, desire that never pronounces itself, and the families we choose versus the families that are thrust upon us by tragic happenstance.

Those first 40 minutes, though, are key: that weave, that scramble, is Roemer's subtle way of getting us into the shape of Brooke Adams's inner rut. She has no real home to return to, her ex-husband thinks they're together, and her sister is a floating non-entity. But with total strangers, she has a chance to start again. With one particular stranger, Trish Van Devere, she seems to gain a new sister. But one always has to side-step the demons of the family that came before. And in all of the troubles with the new sister's mental collapse (which is neither dramatic nor outsized), siblinghood is fully realized. "Welcome to the family," as Timothy Spall's character says in *SECRETS AND LIES*. It's an anguished simmer; nothing happens until everything happens all at once.

Michael Roemer was born in Berlin, Germany, in 1928. At the age of eleven he escaped the Nazis, via Kindertransport, to England, and in 1945 he came to the United States, where he attended Harvard University. While at Harvard, he helped make one of the first undergraduate feature films, *A TOUCH OF THE TIMES* (1949).



Roemer made *NOTHING BUT A MAN* (1964) with college classmate Robert M. Young, followed by, among others, *THE PLOT AGAINST HARRY* (1969; released in 1989), the compelling documentary *DYING* (1976), and *VENGEANCE IS MINE* (1984). As a faculty member in Yale's School of Art and American Studies Program from 1966 to 2017, he has inspired generations of students with his courses in filmmaking and film history.



Michael Roemer is one for the slow burn. He does not get to the punchline, if one can even call his gags punchlines, immediately, right when you either want to or expect to. He delays. It's the way somebody says something, never just the thing itself, that adds the funny. It's an alchemy that can't be explained: you either have a feel for people and their silly foibles, or you don't. You either love them or you don't. Michael loves people. All the better, to gift us more time to indulge in the atmosphere of a scene, to pick up on tics of character, to slowly unravel a situation that gets worse and worse. *UNCUT GEMS*, *THE MARVELOUS MRS. MAISEL*, and *THE LONG GOOD FRIDAY* all find their long-lost godfather with *THE PLOT AGAINST HARRY*, which peters about a long-lost 1960s New York you can only drive by in cinema now. No, it's not as action-packed as those above three. But it's got the same milieu: a small-time Jewish gangster, fresh out of prison, finds himself at the mercy of family members, his former mob, and an assortment of ex-communicated loved ones. His puniness is the joke: as insignificant as he is to his old gangster pals, he's ostracized by the family. No one loves him. What's a guy to do? Answer: cinematize his life. Make us love him. Make us despise him. Make us, in a word, feel. And laugh at the absurdity of it all.

NOTES BY CARLOS VALLADARES

Thanks to Jake Perlin, The Film Desk, Mike Mashon, the Library of Congress, and Colorlab.

NEXT UP: CELEBRATE THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF DUKE ELLINGTON'S WOOLSEY HALL CONCERT AND THE ELLINGTON FELLOWSHIP WITH A SCREENING OF ORIGINAL FOOTAGE FROM THE OCTOBER, 1972 EVENT PLUS THE PRESERVATION PREMIERE OF FILMMAKER WILLIE RUFF'S 1973 DOCUMENTARY **TONY WILLIAMS IN AFRICA**. THE FILM SCREENS IN A NEW 16MM PRINT, WITH WILLIE RUFF IN PERSON! **FRIDAY, OCTOBER 14 AT 7PM.**