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. His puniness finds himself at the mercy of family members, his former gangster pals, and the families we love 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—its punkiness 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? Make us, in a word, feel. And laugh at the absurdity of it all.

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 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).