

Section Two
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FAMILY PLOT

(UNIVERSAL PICTURES)

Color

(PG)

120 Mins.

Cast: Karen Black, Bruce Dern, Barbara Harris, William Devane, Ed Lauter, Cathleen Nesbitt, Katherine Helmond, Warren J. Kemmerling, Edith Atwater, William Prince, Nicholas Colosanto, Marge Redmond, John Lehne, Charles Tyner, Alexander Lockwood, Martin West.

Credits, Directed by Alfred Hitchcock. Screenplay by Ernest Lehman. Based on the Novel "The Rainbird Pattern" by Victor Canning. Assistant to Hitchcock: Peggy Robertson. Photography by Leonard J. South. Edited by J. Terry Williams. Music by John Williams. Production Design by Henry Bumstead.

For his 53rd film, Alfred Hitchcock has toned down the shock value and accentuated the humor in a deliciously complex comedy-suspense drama that will have audiences happily perched in the palm of its hand nearly every step of the way. Barbara Harris and Bruce Dern sparkle as two innocent tricksters whose search for a missing heir suddenly parallels the path of a pair of professional kidnapers. Great fun and bound to be a great hit. 2796

Don't be too surprised if this year's Easter Bunny is portlier than usual, complete with multiple chins, a proudly outjutting belly and only a few wisps of grey hair remaining on his scalp. Chances are he's shown up in the trademarked form of Alfred Hitchcock, beckoning audiences to *Family Plot*, a beautifully constructed, literately witty and thoroughly involving comedy suspense-drama crafted with the sure hands of an impudent genius. Moving even further away from the shuddery sensibilities of his best-known films, Hitchcock seems to have approached his 53rd feature in a mellow and benign mood, spinning his complex web of suspense with a far greater accent on rich humor than on shock value, as if he didn't want his audiences to feel even vaguely threatened or uncomfortable en route to their final catharsis. Stated simply, *Family Plot* promises those audiences one hell of a good time and should prove a rousing success at the boxoffice.

The discomfiting sense of menace may be missing, but in most respects *Family Plot* is still quintessential Hitchcock, a complex plot that begins as a tantalizing mystery, allows itself to be solved for the viewer relatively early on, and then shifts to pure suspense as its convoluted threads inexorably weave themselves together. Beautifully scripted by Ernest Lehman from Victor Canning's novel, "The Rainbird Pattern," the film again taps that steady thematic vein that continually resurfaces in Hitchcock's work: what happens when relatively innocent bystanders find themselves unwittingly—and dangerously—enmeshed in someone else's criminal goings-on.

In this case, the action cuts back and forth between two sets of protagonists, one of them greedy but basically innocent, the other coldly criminal, with both combinations destined to clash trajectories. The heroes of the piece, superbly played by Bruce Dern and Barbara Harris, are a beguiling pair of lower-echelon con artists contriving to track down the missing heir to a dowager's fortune and hoping to earn a \$10,000 finder's fee for their trouble. While Harris, a bogus psychic, manipulates the old woman into revealing all sorts of long forgotten clues during daily seances, Dern, an unemployed actor who works as a cabbie, uses the information she gives him to set off on an amateur detective hunt for the missing heir. Through more than a few coincidences, their search causes them to continually cross the paths of the second couple (William Devane and Karen Black) whose own pursuit of fortune takes the form of consummately executed kidnappings. Their search, needless to say, gradually uncovers more than they really want to know.

More often than not, the intricate plot turns and quirks of character are far wittier and deliciously entertaining than they are tension-provoking, a fact that may momentarily disappoint serious Hitchophiles expecting artfully visualized set pieces like the shower stabbing in *Psycho* or the potato truck scene in *Frenzy*. But the story is definitely the thing, and even if a key scene in which Dern and Harris are pursued down the highway by a murderous car doesn't sustain itself long enough to muster any great



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emotional payoff, there are more than enough ingenious twists and a firm enough overlay of suspense to keep viewers raptly entertained from beginning to end.

Brightening things considerably, and providing two of the most engaging characters ever to fill Hitchcock's viewfinder, are Dern and Harris as a pair of good-hearted bumblers whose liveliness and emotional range firmly counters the kind of cool, cipher-like performances the director is noted for wanting from his actors. As their destined nemesis, Devane checks in effectively as another suave but despicable Hitchcock villain, while Black, as his suddenly rebellious partner, conforms more closely to the cipher quality mentioned above. Strong support comes from Ed Lauter as Devane's psychotically traditional henchman.

Technical credits, barring some of those curiously sloppy process shots Hitchcock seems to relish so much, are excellent, highlighted by a deliciously taunting score by John Williams. Piece by piece and in overall effect, *Family Plot* is as solid an entertainment as any audience—at any level—could ever hope for.

S. K.