

picture of the human capacity for brutality. The oppressive atmosphere of imminent doom is reinforced by Patrick Doyle's soundtrack, incorporating some chants and classical tunes that are both disquieting and infectious, hurtling into chaos along with the characters. The film successfully sustains the impression of all Hell about to break loose.

As is often the case in stories about the devil visiting Earth, this story is fraught with palpable dramatic irony fostered by the inability of the people to recognize either the devil in their midst or how vulnerable to his power they are through temptation. In some scenes it can be darkly funny, as when the Baptist minister welcomes Gaunt to Castle Rock in the name of the Lord, to which a mildly discomfited Gaunt replies, "Why not?", and then goes on to refuse the minister's anti-satanic posters on the grounds that he is, in his own words, "non-denominational" (truer words were never spoken).

The actors' performances range from very good to thoroughly unremarkable. Max Von Sydow, as Gaunt, begins on a rather subdued note in his guise as a common merchant, but as his villainy progresses we catch flashes of Gaunt's cruelty, caprice, and lusts, however much he buries these qualities beneath his facade as a detached, businesslike entrepreneur. In this guise Sydow succeeds at making the devil come

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across as human (albeit the worst of humanity), a self-deprecating, falsely humble, self-serving wretch who tries to come across as an ordinary joe trying to make a living. When asked by one character why he doesn't just simply blow the town off the map and be done with it, Gaunt replies that he isn't a miracle worker: "I'm not the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. I'm just one lonely guy". Ed Harris, exuding earnest dedication and grim determination, gives a strong performance as the town sheriff and the one person who is seemingly immune to Gaunt's temptations, trying to keep the peace and get to the bottom of the havoc in Castle Rock. Bonnie Bedelia, who plays his fiancee, is much less impressive. This may be as much due to the

character as the actress, but Bedelia comes across as more object than character, playing "stand by your man" for the early part of the movie but later being seduced into becoming Gaunt's plaything. Her character's pain and turmoil do emerge very clearly at times, but the character is still hard to like or believe at times. The leads are backed firmly by a strong supporting cast including J.T. Walsh and Amanda Plummer.

Needful Things is a disturbing and thought-provoking film in its cautionary depiction of the horrible destructive potential of human pettiness and greed in a society obsessed with things, material wealth and comforts. This

message, with some interesting symbolism, irony, and good acting, puts *Needful Things* a notch or two above your average gorefest. It's still a darkly bloody film, though, and despite its better points it can leave a rather unpleasant taste in your mouth from the carnage alone, to say nothing of the cynical aspects of the film. *Needful Things* does suggest in the end that there is some hope for humanity and that the devil's power is ultimately limited, but whether you care about the themes of the film or not, you may want to see it just as a competent supernatural thriller, as long as you can stomach the bloody violence and disturbing concepts that typify films such as this one.

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