



Dangerous Moves



ACADEMY AWARD WINNER
BEST FOREIGN FILM

Computer mavens have arrived reluctantly at the conclusion that a mere machine, however ingeniously programmed, would byte off more than it could chew against the world's top chess grandmasters. Chess, the undisputed monarch of mental board games, remains a quintessentially human competition complete with aggressions and neuroses. Richard Dembo's *Dangerous Moves*, this year's Oscar-winner as last year's best foreign film, mixes together some of the more outrageous stratagems employed in recent world championship matches. The characters themselves are jumbled composites of Fischer-Spassky, Karpov-Korchnoi, and even the recently interrupted Kasparov-Karpov.

Actually, the Kasparov-Karpov scandal erupted after the film was shot, but nonetheless reinforced the film's thesis that international chess has degenerated into still another pawn in the cold war. The Soviet Union and its many stooges in the Chess Confederation were not content merely to strip Bobby Fischer of his title on an issue of proposed rules changes. They subsequently conspired to interrupt a chess match (under the very stalemate-inducing rules Fischer had attempted to alter) they feared their official favorite was in danger of losing. The Soviets are seemingly intent on keeping the title in friendly hands by hook or by crook. I don't wish to tweak the collective noses of American Marxists who still insist that competitiveness is an American capitalist monopoly, but merely to recon-

firm the fact that around the world what counts is not how you play the game, but whether you win.

Writer-director Dembo's treatment of the material retains some anti-Soviet elements but takes the sting out of the cold war ramifications by making both rivals Russian. Dembo pulls an even bigger switch by making the official Soviet champion Akiva Liebskind (Michel Piccoli) a Jew and the dissident émigré Pavius Fromm (Alexander Arbatt) a non-Jew. This is almost the exact reverse of the Kasparov-Karpov imbroglio in that Kasparov, the Jewish challenger, is clearly the less favored alternative to Karpov, the non-Jewish champion. On the other hand, there is nothing to indicate that Kasparov is a dissident in the Korchnoi mold. Alexander Arbatt, himself a political émigré from the Soviet Union, plays Pavius Fromm with much more romantic eccentricity than could ever be claimed by the off-putting stormy petrel Fischer, who functioned in his time as the John McEnroe of chess. Arbatt, a youngish actor, exudes more vitality than Korchnoi, who, in turn, bears more resemblance in physical vulnerability to Piccoli's Liebskind.

This is not to criticize Dembo for seeking more balance in the dramatic conflict. *Dangerous Moves* would be a much weaker movie if it dumped all the badness on the Soviet side. Dembo is concerned more with the psychological nuances of a pressure situation than with a vulgar triumph of good over evil. He is

especially good with the fringe characters on the respective "teams" and with the day-to-day preparation for combat. The conspiratorial atmosphere that permeates both camps is a far cry from the playful treatment in V. S. Pudovkin's *Chess Fever* of the visiting Cuban prodigy Capablanca to Russia in 1924 for a championship match with the legendary Alekhine. My own brief flirtation with chess has left me with a fond memory of one of Alekhine's classic games, in which he boldly sacrificed his queen and a rook in order to checkmate his opponent with a second rook.

The wifely appearances of Leslie Caron as Henia Liebskind and Liv Ullmann as Marina Fromm are, the pleasing personalities of the two actresses notwithstanding, more of an intrusion than an intervention in a genre that is as unreconcilably masculine as a western. There is not all that much difference, after all, between a chess match and a gunfight. There is also a hidden affection between two antagonists who actually need each other in order to shine. Dembo's nicely sentimental ending makes of *Dangerous Moves* what Raymond Durgat once described as a male weepie. Michel Piccoli is particularly affecting through all his ambiguities in a performance that marks him once more as one of the greatest actors and brightest screen presences in the world today.

Andrew Sarris
VILLAGE VOICE

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Press Release

PRESS SCREENINGS

Richard Dembo's

'DANGEROUS MOVES'

EVENT: An exclusive Northern California premiere engagement of Richard Dembo's DANGEROUS MOVES (Switzerland, 1983).

TIME: Wednesday, June 26, at 12 noon and 6 PM, at JWA's screening room, 582 Market Street, San Francisco.

PLEASE RSVP - 921-9174.

OPENING DATE: Wednesday, July 3, at the CLAY Theatre, Fillmore at Clay, San Francisco.

RUNNING TIME: 96 minutes.

STORY: Winner of this year's Oscar for "best foreign language film," Swiss director Richard Dembo's DANGEROUS MOVES stars Michel Piccoli, Liv Ullmann, Leslie Caron, and Soviet emigre, Alexander Arbatt, in a political intrigue revolving around outrageous stratagems recently employed in world chess matches.

Set in Geneva, Switzerland, the film centers on a match between the reigning world champion, Akiva Liebskind (Michel Piccoli), a courtly Russian veteran with heart trouble, and his arrogant, longhaired young challenger, defector Pavius Fromm (Alexander Arbatt, a defector himself).

Liebskind and Fromm know each other, yet Soviet policy dictates that they never fraternize and barely acknowledge each other as they play. Swirling around them is an assortment of bureaucrats, hangers-on, assistants -- and eventually, psychological saboteurs. Henia (Leslie Caron) is the loving and devoted companion to Akiva, while Marina (Liv Ullmann), Pavius' estranged wife, makes a sudden appearance in the midst of the championship which could determine the outcome.

COMMENTS: "An intelligent delight. Michel Piccoli is particularly affecting through all his ambiguities in a performance that marks him once more as one of the greatest actors and brightest screen presences in the world today." Andrew Sarris-Village Voice

"Highly entertaining. A celebration of two men whose desire to compete transcends politics." David Denby, New York Magazine

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