

With a Friend Like Harry

What begins as a modest, offhand familial drama moves gingerly into a sketch of domestic tension before insinuating itself fully into a tale of dread and murder. Such is the arc of the new French suspense film *With a Friend Like Harry...*, a prize winner in France last year, a featured film in last month's Filmfest DC, and an intriguing addition to Washington's current film fare.

Harassed family man Michel Pape (Laurent Lucas), his wife Claire (Mathilde Seigner) and their three crabby daughters are heading (sans A/C in their jalopy) for their summer home in the south of France when, stopping at a rest area, Michel runs across old school classmate Harry Ballestreo (Sergi Lopez). Though Harry remembers Michel fondly--even recalling his schoolboy poetry--Michel is at a bit of a loss. Yet Harry, along with his comely girlfriend Plum (Sophie Guillemin) and his cool new Mercedes, soon charms the Papes and agrees to join them on their summer vacation. The French title of the film--"Harry, un ami qui vous veut du bien"--is literally *Harry, a Friend Who Wishes You Well*, and that seems to be just what he is up to.

But soon Harry is taking up Michel's interests in earnest, insisting that Michel again follow his "true" literary bent, buying the family a new 4 X 4 van, and doing sundry favors. Beyond this, he's becoming rather *too* attuned to all the family's concerns and problems (including Michel's difficulties with his troublesome parents). More ominously, Harry intones a credo--"excess is the only way to fulfillment"--which he aims to prove. His concern for Michel's life slides uneasily into a desire for control over that life, a desire that leads him to careful plotting and murder. Eventually Michel and Claire, sensing the worst, realize they must do something or...

With a Friend Like Harry... crucially depends on the character of Harry himself. Sergi Lopez, a round-faced, unassuming fellow, is well cast as the protagonist, a man who can readily ingratiate himself with others yet--with a mere tightening of the mouth and squinting of the eyes--can metamorphose into a figure of anxiety and dread. Though a Spaniard, Lopez has been very active in French cinema, and his slight foreignness in the film adds both to his amiability and to his mystery in the role. His performance was effective enough to earn him the "César" award last year, the French equivalent of the Oscar, as best actor. Perhaps also contributing to the slight quirkiness of this production was its direction by a German, Dominic Moll (himself a winner of a "César" prize for best direction for *Harry*).

This sinister little tale could be labeled (maybe too readily) "Hitchcockian," and the appellation fits in part. It is a suspense story, after all, with rhythms that both heighten and slacken that suspense, as the Master used to do, and, of course, there is murder in the mix. Also akin to Hitchcock, this film is definitely not a "mystery." There is no mystery as to the murderer's identity--hey, it's Harry--and that is clearly not the point of the film. The point is to, rather slowly, sneakily, delineate a kind of creeping pathology, of how friendship can twist into possession. In tracing that pathology, *With a Friend Like Harry...* is a neat monument to menace.

(May 2001)