

Sleuth

★☆☆☆☆ (cert 15)

Peter Bradshaw



Blast from the past... The crew of Sleuth crossed their fingers, touched wood and thought of The Crow

In its own way, this film is an awesome, even terrifying demonstration of star power. If really, really big names are involved, they can get anything made. Even this. And this is a Dead Film Walking, a zombie of a film, a shuffling Frankenstein's monster of a film, leaking electricity from its badly-fitting neck bolts, tragically whimpering at the pointless agony of its own brief existence. Whose idea was it to zap this raddled corpse with electrodes and make it jolt and reel and stagger around for 88 impossibly painful minutes? The culpable white-coated scientists are its stars, Michael Caine and Jude Law, whose conceit the idea appears to have tickled; its screenwriter, Nobel laureate Harold Pinter, and its director, Kenneth Branagh. This formidable quartet's very worst aspects have here come together in a perfect storm of rubbishness.

It is an unendurably boring, stagey, boring, arthritic, misconceived - and did I mention boring - new adaptation of Sleuth, the 1970 play by Anthony Shaffer, about a middle-aged thriller writer called Andrew Wyke, who invites his errant wife's sexy young lover Milo to his palatial country pad, ostensibly to discuss divorce arrangements like a civilised person. But really he wants to toy with him, play games with him, and generally mess with his head - as revenge for being sexually humiliated. It became a 1972 movie starring Laurence Olivier and a young Caine. Now it is Caine who plays the malign oldster and Law, very self-consciously indeed, inherits the younger man's mantle.

But wait. "New"? A "new" version? Well, it is new in the sense that Pinter has tinkered with the plot and very much recreates Wyke in his own image. Olivier's catty theatricality has gone and Wyke is now full of taciturn, fish-eyed menace. There is much play with the modernity of a hi-tech surveillance system, which Wyke operates with an iPod-ish remote. Branagh begins by tricking out his movie with some wacky camera angles, inspired by the CCTV-motif. After just a few minutes, however, the gimmick is dispensed with, and normal cinematography is sheepishly restored.

There is, catastrophically, nothing new about this new *Sleuth*: there is no sense of history or perspective, no ingenious transformation or clever recontextualisation. It's about as new as the billionth performance of *The Mousetrap* or *No Sex Please, We're British*. Its assumptions about sex and class are 30 years old; its creaky plot points about divorce don't make sense; it has a Dr Evil-style pre-inflationary belief in the value of a "million pounds" and its attempts to interest us in a potential homoerotic charge between the principals are not daring but just embarrassing. It's the deadest possible mutton dressed as 21st-century lamb.

Pinter's dialogue is painfully unconvincing and mannered, neither remotely believable nor entertaining in its artificiality. The script has Wyke offering his young victim endless and laborious "drinks" in a way I thought Mike Leigh had killed off with *Abigail's Party*. The drinks he offers are 70s drinks, stage-business drinks, unrefrigerated drinks offered from a sideboard, or a clump of bottles on a round silver tray; drinks are the bottomless source of filler-dialogue to keep things moving. (Like a drink? Vodka? Scotch? As it comes? What are you drinking? How's your glass? Christ - who cares?) There isn't a soda-siphon, but there might as well be.

Well, Caine always brings a certain charisma to any film, a basic level of background radioactivity, although his capacity for auto-pilot detachment is on display. Law, however, with his saucer-eyed mugging and terrible accents, is frankly awful, but as the film's co-producer and driving force, he may simply be beyond direction. Branagh, as a talented and accomplished actor himself, may have fatally indulged what he saw as an actors' project or, worse yet, a stars' project. And Pinter's script is just self-parody, and dull self-parody at that.

It has long been a bee in my bonnet that Branagh has unjustly fallen out of favour with London's arts media set, obsessed with boorish luvvie-bating: that he is a high-minded director whose attractive and intelligent *As You Like It* I recently enjoyed and to whose *Magic Flute* I look forward very much. But this does not do him any favours and certainly doesn't do the audience any favours either.

What a waste. Maybe if Branagh had revived *Sleuth* for the stage, and got Law and Caine to face off, in real time, in front of a packed theatre crowd, night after night - that might have worked. Doing it live might have been an antidote to the datedness and deadness and even given a weird necrophiliac frisson to the proceedings. This is just necrophilia.

How does the writer use language to express how awful *Sleuth* is?