

reel reviews

★★★ *The Hitcher*

Royal Park

"My mom told me never to do this," said Jim Halsey as he picked up a hitchhiker. His mother was right. Jim is a young man, probably in his late teens, who is delivering a car to San Diego. He tries to engage the hitcher in conversation, but his passenger remains aloof and mysterious.

Jim (C. Thomas Howell) tries to pull over when he sees a stranded motorist, but the stranger shoves his foot onto the gas and forces Jim to keep going. Calling himself John Ryder (Rutger Hauer), the hitcher calmly tells why it was pointless to stop: he'd already cut off the arms, legs, and head of the other driver!

Understandably nervous, Jim stops the car and asks him to leave, but it's a little late for that. John pulls out a switchblade and suggests that he continue driving. Jim finally blurts out, "What do

Poor					★
Fair				★	★
Good			★	★	★
Very Good	★	★	★	★	★
Excellent	★	★	★	★	★

you want?" "I want you to stop me," he answers softly, placing the knife under Jim's chin. Though Jim manages to escape, we're safe in assuming his troubles have just begun.

As the film progresses, John Ryder becomes a lurking, almost omniscient presence; seeming to second-guess everything that Jim will do. Jim tries to contact the police, but John tricks them into thinking that *Jim* is the one on a murder spree.

The distraught young man becomes a nervous wreck as everyone he comes in contact with is butchered by the hitcher—while he remains unharmed. In fact, John even tries to help him, going so far as to give the boy bullets for an empty gun he'd been toting around.

"Why are you doing this to

me?" Jim cries out. "You are a smart boy," he answers. "You figure it out." Why *is* he doing this? That is the intriguing question posed by this refreshingly

This film marks the screenwriting debut of Eric Red and I'm willing to bet he grew up watching "The Twilight Zone." Like that classic TV show, *The Hitcher* creates an eerie feeling of suspense and leaves the viewer with tantalizing questions about motive and meaning.

Hauer is excellent as the pleasantly psychotic John Ryder. He has the wonderful ability to make villains appealing and believable, and we're completely convinced that the hitcher has some complex motive for what he does; that he's really trying to "help" Jim Halsey.

Howell is less commendable as Jim and it hurts the movie because he's in almost every scene. He's okay, but that's not good enough; for it's Jim who must undergo a change, Jim who must become whatever he becomes. (A man? A murderer? A mental patient? Your guess is as good as mine.)

The relationship between Jim and the hitcher is complex and morbidly fascinating. It's almost as if the devil were training a protegee. *The Hitcher* is far from perfect, but it's something different, so why not take a chance and go for a ride?

by Michael Giltz

