

# ASSASSINS

by

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Directed by Richard Donner. Screenplay by Andy Wachowski, Larry Wachowski and Brian Helgeland. Distributed by Warner Bros., 1995

# INTRODUCTION

Robert Rath (Sylvester Stallone) is a contract killer near the end of his career. He wants to take on one last assignment, one that will pay \$20 million, and retire.

His victim, Electra (Julianne Moore), is an information thief with a diskette of information on the mob. Competing with Rath is Miguel Bain (Antonio Banderas), a leering homicidal maniac, who has modeled his career after Rath's in all aspects except Rath's restraint, and now wants to kill Rath so he can be "Number One."

Fifteen years ago, Rath did the same to his mentor, Nicolai Anatoli Davydov, and has felt guilty ever since. Rath and Electra fall in love. Nicolai unexpectedly reappears, only to be killed. Rath kills Bain. The contract killer and the thief go off to live happily ever after with their \$20 million. (Rated R)

# ASSASSINS

Clearly, Assassins is a "star vehicle," that is, a film that depends on the personal fame of its stars, and not the story, to attract an audience. Certainly, Sylvester Stallone has been a bankable star since his very first film, Rocky [1976], for which, believe it or not, he received an Academy Award (so much for the credibility of the Academy). The meteoric Antonio Banderas, on the other hand, is Hollywood's current hottest heartthrob.

While it is the stars the audience comes to see, what is it they really watch? That there are strong psychological messages even in the most dismissible of films (of which Assassins can claim a place near the top of the list) cannot be denied. Perhaps because of its artistic and cinematic transparency, Assassins is a perfect place to look at the problems presented by the conflicting messages that bombard the audience in many contemporary films.

The essence of the problem is a conflict between social/political needs and mythological/psychological needs. It is typical that simplistic films will, simplistically, depend on well-known, popular myths. While a more complex film, like True Lies [1995], will utilize the structures offered by a myth like the story of Amor and Psyche, Assassins depends on an old war-horse myth like Oedipus. Again, a young man attempts to kill an older man he respects in order to take his place. (Just in case we do not get the mythological reference,

the love interest is named "Electra." And, at the end of the film, Bain – which rhymes with Cain – is wounded in the leg. Oedipus, of course, means "swollen foot.")

Actually, *Assassins* does the myth twice. Fifteen years ago, Rath killed his mentor, Nicolai, and has suffered Oedipal guilt ever since. However, most of the film is (boringly) preoccupied with Bain trying to be "Number One" in the contract killer market by offing Rath – his father-figure. If this story were to be played out "by the book," Rath would kill Nicolai (which he does, with Bain's help – ah, how a son does love a father-figure) and Bain would kill Rath (which he does not). And herein lies the rub.

Why doesn't Bain kill Rath at the end of the film? Certainly, Stallone, as the major star cannot be killed by Banderas, the minor star. However, there are other reasons which do not extend beyond the screen. There is a strong sociological/political reason the Oedipal myth is not played out to its logical conclusion.

The mutual respect between pseudo-father and pseudo-son is clearly established in the film. But beyond that, the film gives us little in terms of similarities. While Rath is a paid assassin, he kills only those he is hired to kill – and no one else. Thus, during the course of *Assassins*, he kills only two people, and those in self-defense. Bain, on the other hand, kills without even a hint of remorse or a second thought and, during the film, kills dozens. He is a

leering, twitching, homicidal (over-acting, scenery-chewing) maniac (not a great stereotype/role-model to present on screen for a popular Hispanic actor), while Rath is cool and collected – no matter what.

Because of these values, the politics of the story outweigh the mythology and Rath must kill Bain, the admirable father must kill the monster son. Even in a film as insignificant as *Assassins*, we once again see the power of popular myth in film, the very narrowness and consistency of its narrative renderings. Apparently, in these politically correct times (despite the fact that the film is about a paid killer, a thief, and a homicidal maniac), rationality and remorse are the values that society opts for, even in the worst of people – and these values currently outweigh mythological considerations. As a society, are we really so desperate for decorum and decency that we look for it in extreme characters like Rath, Bain and Electra, having, apparently, given up searching for in the social mainstream?

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