

DEAD CERT

“They do say racing attracts the worst of every class!”

Laura Davidson (Judi Dench)

It’s easy to imagine an alternative universe in which horse-racing thriller *Dead Cert* made a killing at global box-offices, initiating a successful run of Dick Francis adaptations and elevating dashing lead Scott Antony—who plays a hot-headed amateur jockey investigating the mysterious death of his pal aboard a “nobbled” horse—to the front ranks of international stars and perhaps even a stint as James Bond...

Back in the real world, however, the picture failed to impress either audiences or critics: more than four decades later it remains the only one of Francis’s myriad bestsellers to make the big screen, and poor Antony almost literally fell off the map within months of release. His female co-star Judi Dench, appearing here with her husband Michael Williams, wouldn’t make another feature-film for over a decade, concentrating instead on more rewarding television and stage work. Now the film is best known—if it’s remembered at all—as a odd early footnote in (the future Dame) Judi’s late-blossoming, spectacularly successful career: a “false start” to use turf terminology.

What went wrong? In retrospect it seems that director Tony Richardson, understandably hungry for a fresh beginning after a badly-received run of international projects culminating in *Down Under* western Ned Kelly (1970), sought a project that was reassuringly British (the Sport of Kings!) and boasted rock-solid commercial potential. A lurid brew of race-fixing, organised crime, sex, drugs, drink and even a little rock-and-roll, all seen through an angular, topical, very ‘Woodfall’ prism of belatedly shifting class-relations, *Dead Cert* seeks to cram a quart of plot into a pint-pot running-time. The excitement culminates in a comically compressed version of Liverpool’s Grand National steeplechase which is surely the most chaotically eventful and bloodthirsty thoroughbred horse-race ever committed to celluloid.

These high-octane melodramatics—every development crashingly underlined by John Addison’s hyper-active score—sit a somewhat ungainly alongside a backdrop of deep-grained racing-game versimilitude. The script was co-written by the film’s technical adviser, respected journalist and author Lord Oaksey (aka John Lawrence), himself an amateur jump-jockey of fabled prowess. (Racing aficionados will be amused by Oaksey’s ubiquity here: he’s listed as one of the riders in the first race shown, is heard providing exposition-heavy tannoy commentary, and then pops up in a cameo as the racecourse vet!) Lawrence paints a somewhat unflattering but not inaccurate portrayal of the jump-jockey’s life: a rollercoaster existence noted for its physical hardships—strenuous sweating regimes to “make the weight”—boisterous weighing-room camaraderie, and unbridled after-hours hedonism including enough bed-hopping to make a bohemian blush: the final freeze-frame hints discreetly but firmly towards an imminent celebratory threesome.

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The picture is at its strongest during its rare slower paces, when Richardson isn't weighed down with plot-mechanics amid borrowings from the blood-spattered playbook of such recent gangland-themed successes as Mike Hodges' gleefully nasty *Get Carter* (1971). Such passages showcase the impressive quality of the cast: Antony, a charismatic and virile screen-presence, was fresh from his galvanic performance as Henri Gaudier-Brzeska in Ken Russell's *Savage Messiah*; Dench and relative unknown Nina Thomas find plentiful nuance in their roles as his contrasting paramours.

In the supporting cast, superb character-actor Julian Glover revels in the suave villainy of a posh, corrupt cop; at the other end of the social scale, real-life Cockney hard-man John Bindon (a chance Ken Loach discovery for *Poor Cow*, also seen briefly but memorably at the start of *Get Carter*) makes for an effective, disarmingly genial heavy. Back in 1974, however, the biggest "name" in the cast was arguably that of Cornishman V, the double Olympic gold-medallist eventer who convincingly incarnates Admiral, hapless equine epicentre of the nefarious shenanigans.