

# Homicidal

1961 | USA | 87 min.

## Credits

<b>Director</b>	William Castle
<b>Screenplay</b>	Robb White
<b>Photography</b>	Burnett Guffey
<b>Music</b>	Hugo Friedhofer

## Cast

<b>Karl Anderson</b>	Glenn Corbett
<b>Miriam Webster</b>	Patricia Breslin
<b>Helga Swenson</b>	Eugenie Leontovich
<b>Doctor Jonas</b>	Alan Bunce

## In Brief

A blonde woman checks into a hotel offers hotel porter Jim \$2000 if he will marry her the next day; the marriage will immediately be annulled after the ceremony. Jim agrees to the deal, but as soon as the Justice of the Peace has performed the ceremony the woman pulls out a knife, repeatedly stabs him, flees and speeds off in Jim's car. Thus the scene is set for this intriguing, twisty-turny, psycho-thriller which owes more than a little to Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*.

At the climax there is a 45 second "Fright Break", giving those of you who cannot stand the tension at the climax the option of standing in the "Coward's Corner" to be shamed and humiliated by your more courageous peers before receiving a refund on your ticket.

William Castle's efforts to establish himself as Alfred Hitchcock's rival in cinema thrills and public notoriety sees him kick off this film with a brief but amusing little cameo in which he offers to the audience's eye the product of his own embroidery talents, displaying the film's title, adopting a playfully sing-song voice in trying to capture Hitch's familiar brand of schoolboy's black humour. The first twenty minutes of *Homicidal*, an attempt to steal the limelight of Hitchcock's game-changing hit *Psycho* (1960), seems to promise Castle's best film. In one of Ventura County's sleazier precincts, a young woman calling herself Miriam Webster (Jean Arless) checks into a hotel, and, after pointedly requesting the younger, virile-looking bellboy, Jim Nesbitt (Richard Rust) to carry her bags to her room, hits the young man with a strange business offer. She wants him to marry her, and then have the marriage immediately annulled, for the price of \$2,000 dollars.

Nesbitt reluctantly agrees, after swallowing his slightly wounded pride in realising that she doesn't want to marry him for real, and lets her drive him a tedious distance to the house of a JP, Alfred S. Adrims (James Westerfield) and his wife. In a splendidly seedy vignette, the slovenly Adrims, clutching a bottle of booze in his nightgown, takes care to overcharge the couple, Miriam shooting eyes like daggers at Nesbitt when he starts to protest, and then enjoins his wife (Hope Summers) to play the Bridal March ("It'll disturb the neighbours!" "Then play soft!"). When Adrims bends forward with a leer to kiss the bride, Miriam is suddenly gripped by an apparently reactive frenzy and repeatedly knifes the JP in the stomach. She flees as Adrims expires in Nesbitt's arms. It's a scene that displays Castle's gift for blackly comic American gothic as suggested in *The Tingler* (1959), and sports a defiant amount of gore for a 1961 film, Adrims' gut gushing (grey) blood as his assassin stabs him with joyless but relished, prosecutorial fury.

Emily eludes police by stealing Nesbitt's car and then changing to another she's left waiting, and makes it unscathed to a large house outside the small Californian town of Solvang. It soon emerges that this woman is not Miriam Webster at all: she's Emily, nursemaid to Helga (Eugenie Leontovich) the crippled old former nanny to the real Miriam and her half-brother Warren, brought back to America from Denmark, where Warren and Helga spent many years after his parents died in a car crash. Emily's campaign seems, initially, to set up Miriam (Patricia Breslin), who keeps a florist's, as a murderess, but soon her efforts seem less directed, as she trashes Miriam's shop, taking special care to destroy all the wedding paraphernalia, before lurking in wait for Miriam's boyfriend, chemist Karl Anderson (Glenn Corbett), and knocking him unconscious. Karl awakens to Warren's solicitous aid, and Karl and Miriam begin trying to puzzle out the mystery of Emily's place in Warren's life: Miriam eventually seems to learn that they are secretly married. But the truth, which takes until the very climax to emerge, if you're utterly blind, is that Warren is Emily, brought up since birth to take the place of the boy her father had desperately, imperiously demanded. Now she's utilising her ability to shift between genders to create in Emily a murderess scapegoat who can eliminate all who know about his/her secret and whatever impediments remain to inheriting the Webster fortune.

Burnett Guffey's photography apes *Psycho*'s look with its hyper-contrast black and white and minimalist settings. Whilst Castle was undoubtedly an opportunist, his oeuvre is marked out by his recurring decision to couch his stories in themes of familial homicide – the husband-wife duels of *House on Haunted Hill* and *The Tingler* give way here to an even darker, and in some ways brilliantly anticipatory, theme of childhood perversion and fatally blurred gender roles. These are encapsulated by the cunning final shot of the doll that was Miriam's favourite toy and the whip that was the tool to toughen up "Warren" lying together in a coldly mocking emblem of the sort of psychosexual signifiers that would have sent Jacques Lacan in to paroxysms of ecstatic deconstruction. Emily is repeatedly drawn into tactile fascination with such signifiers, caressing the short hair cut of a young boy and clutching a doll with dead-eyed, cheated maternal confusion. The notion that Warren/Emily has been driven mad by not only by cruelty in upbringing but by inability to reconcile the rigid codes of masculinity and femininity in a classically patriarchal household, holds a wondrous potential for dark satire and subversive assault on the mainstream ideals of the '50s over and above what *Psycho* achieved, and also looks forward to Dario Argento's rich variation on these themes, *Deep Red* (1975).





Even more pointed is the ironic theme involving the ease with which familial roles can be filled or emptied according to economic consequences, adds urgency to Warren/Emily's campaign of schismatic role-annihilation: Emily's initial buying of a husband gives way to her final efforts to murder her sister, all to assure Warren's inheritance, which, it has been dictated, must go to the younger male inheritor, but only as long as he is male – Warren/Emily's efforts then simply extend and invert the mean-spirited enforcement of a patriarchal ideal, that subjects the theoretical bonds of family to mere capitalism. The very finish, after Warren/Emily is rather casually dispatched with a bullet in the back by Miriam, is a jokier play on the deliberately cheesy explanation of Psycho, but lacks the sting of Hitchcock's punchline, as Karl's comic last line, replying to Miriam's question as to whether her new-found wealth will change things between them ("Yes it will Miriam... I think I'm going to love you more!"), deliberately deflates the tension between love and money that is central to the story.

And yet Warren/Emily is constantly driven to fury by being confronted with the signifiers of romantic love and marriage, something s/he has a cruel outsider's perspective on, and her game involves a pretend marriage between the different aspects of herself. Emily hires a man to sharpen her favourite weapon of murder, a surgical knife, the weapon with which she determinedly attempts to cut apart her own fatally concatenated life by cutting apart the people in it, the act of the sharpening lingered over in almost erotic pleasure. Much of the film's overt suspense and most compelling scenes comes from the constant toying Emily engages in with Helga, who, wheelchair-bound and mute after a stroke, attempts to constantly tap out messages pleading for aid but has Emily purposefully mistranslate them. Helga's part in establishing nursery room authority and rewriting the "natural" codes of gender has been completely, viciously inverted, for all of Helga's most despairing efforts to communicate with the outside world, including the local physician, Doctor Jonas (Alan Bunce), fail, before Emily finally, gleefully cleaves her head off. Emily's delight in controlling her crippled muse of violence clearly looks forward to the sisterly sadomasochism of Whatever Happened to Baby Jane? (1963). Castle's overt gimmick, that Arless plays Emily and Warren, albeit with a man dubbing over Arless' lines when inhabiting Warren, largely explains why he's otherwise quite restrained, except for a "fright break" towards the end, sporting a clock dial on the screen, giving audience members too freaked out a chance to retreat to the "Coward's Corner".

Castle's reputation as a trashy, entertaining showman obscures, to a large extent, his essentially conservative solidity as a filmmaker, in spite of his overt acts of canny barker hype and delight in trying to tease and nauseate his audience, and both the longevity of his efforts and their frustrating lack of truly cinematic punch can both be laid down to this solidity. His stalwart technique always kept his chosen narratives from approaching the outer limits of hysteria they promised. Castle does spice his style up here with flash cuts to close-ups of Emily's eyes during her wild moments, but is otherwise largely content to stick with his usual variation on master shots from one side of his sets, to which the action is largely bound, as per old studio practise, and dully rhythmic exposition. Then again, the concision with which Castle offers up some patently weird images and frames his action, demands respect: even if Castle's inspiration is only present in flashes, at least the flashes, when they come, are fascinating. But the screenplay, by Castle's usual collaborator in his later fright-fests, Robb White, is again full of good ideas but only functional, flat characters and dialogue.

The middle act, after the strong start and before the off-the-wall last ten minutes, is a slow plod, depending on the hilariously unconvincing masquerade of Arless as a man to sustain mystery and tension, and giving far too much screen time to the bland-as-beige Miriam and Karl. The clever dark humour and intriguing suggestions in the early scenes giving way to a main story that's impossible to take seriously as it's played out, and Castle's imagination is finally too literal to take it stranger places. Admittedly, the central ruse needed either uncommonly brilliant mimicry or outright surrealist campiness to be pulled off effectively, or, preferably, keeping Warren off screen. Although Arless does a good job in imitating a young man's body language, her appearance, with a dental plate that keeps her from closing her mouth properly much of the time, makes her look more a demented butch chipmunk, and it effectively ruins what chance the film has of sustaining real tension. Still, Arless gives it the old school try, and her performance is a lot of fun.

Homicidal does kick upwards again as it builds towards Emily's final murder of Helga. Helga's dumb-show appeals to Jonas, and the doctor's delightfully idiotic response to the urgent terror on the woman's face (he does come back in the nick of time later to save Miriam, but all too late to help Helga, because he was "concerned"), Castle pushing in for an indelible close-up of Helga trying to communicate, and then Emily's girlish, taunting glee in letting Helga try and escape her on the elevator that takes her wheelchair up and down the stairs, before delivering the coup-de-grace, is all compellingly bizarre. The (suggested) gruesome pay-off, that Emily leaves Helga's severed head balanced in place, ready to plunge down the stairs at the slightest disturbance, as a welcome-home gift to Miriam, is a memorably funny touch and also anticipates the later compulsory scene in slasher films like Halloween (1978) in which caches of victims are discovered like the killer's idea of practical jokes. Nobody over the age of six years was in any need of retreating to the Coward's Corner, at any rate.

This Island Rod [Roderick Heath]

