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The Fatal Flaws of Fatal Attraction

By: Ben W. Heineman Jr. & Cristine Russell
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The writer of the 1987 thriller disliked the ending that Hollywood put on the movie. A new live adaptation addresses his concerns—but doesn't fix the deeper problem with the story.



The psycho-thriller “Fatal Attraction,” the highest grossing movie of 1987, was a must-see film that turned a successful New York lawyer’s weekend affair with a sexy single publishing exec into a terrifying tale of obsession. Her demonic pursuit of him, and his family, ended with a shocking plot twist that left viewers stunned. Twenty-five years

later, the hit film has been resurrected in a neon-lit theatrical production that premiered recently in London's West End.

Both the original screenplay and new play are the work of British screenwriter James Dearden. Despite an Oscar nomination for *Fatal Attraction*, he had long been dissatisfied with the Hollywood ending that Paramount Pictures' producers insisted on. So, for his first live stage effort, Dearden, now 64, rewrote the plot, making the characters more complicated, the message more ambiguous, and the finale more in line with his original vision.

The film's striking commercial success—[reviews](#) were mixed—was largely attributed to the insistence on script changes by famed producers Stanley Jaffe and Sherry Lansing, based on test screening reactions. The obsessive Alex Forrest (played by the Glenn Close as a provocative frizzy-haired blonde) became an archetypal psycho—made far more dangerous and frightening. And the object of her desire, lawyer and family man Dan Gallagher (Michael Douglas, then 43), became more sympathetic—less a philanderer and more the victim of a mad vixen. The new ending was an edge-of-the-seat shocker.

Although he agreed to revise the screenplay (to his everlasting pecuniary benefit), screenwriter James Dearden always felt uncomfortable about the transformation of Dan to a more likeable guy and Alex to horror-movie harridan. So, after all these years, he decided to write a play more in keeping with his initial full-length film script (which was based on a 1979 short film called *Diversion* that he wrote and directed).

The new London production is directed by the august Trevor Nunn (of Royal Shakespeare Company renown) but with less incandescent actors: Stage and television star Natascha McElhone (*Californication*) as Alex; British actor Mark Bazeley (*Bourne Ultimatum*) as Dan, and *Sex and the City*'s popular Kristin Davis as devoted wife and mother Beth.

Said Dearden: “[I] wanted to return to my original conception of the characters in a sense to set the record straight. Because while Alex is undeniably borderline psychotic, she is also a tragic figure, worn down by a series of disappointments in love and the sheer brutality of living in New York as a single woman in a demanding career. So whilst remaining faithful to the storyline, I have introduced the ambivalence of my earlier drafts ... nobody is entirely right and nobody entirely wrong.”

Actress Close, who initially fought the producers' changed film ending, also worried in later interviews that her demonic portrayal of Alex had given the audience an unsympathetic view of mental illness. Some feminists fumed at the film's negative portrayal of a single thirty-something career woman, while men saw it as an infidelity morality tale. In 2008, Close was quoted as saying, "Men still come up to me and say, 'You scared the shit out of me.' Sometimes they say, 'You saved my marriage.' "

Like the film, the play, which we saw during previews, has a certain voyeuristic, centrifugal force. We are drawn, despite ourselves, into the ageless story of adultery in this threatening, unsettling incarnation. McElhone's Alex now veers between a troubled, fragile character and a vengeful wronged woman. (Spoiler alert: The daughter's pet bunny is still boiled on the family stove, leading to the term "bunny boiler" for a outraged mistress.)

Bazeley's Dan is seduced and relentlessly pursued, to be sure, but is untruthful, chauvinistic, and surprisingly unconcerned about his unborn child (conceived in the brief sexual fling with Alex). Dan's too-perfect wife, a devoted homemaker and fulltime mother in the film, is given a pre-baby career in the play. After Dan reveals the secret affair, Davis's Beth, smiley and somewhat treacly until then, delivers a bitter speech berating him for betraying her trust after she has sacrificed own career for the family.

Still, like the film, the play is pure melodrama, acted at high volume with no insight into the psychological question at its center. Why does Alex seduce a man wearing a wedding ring, and why is she so obsessed? While married lovers and psychotherapy are mentioned in passing, we learn virtually nothing about her past and have little idea about who she is.

Unlike the film, the play is narrated by Dan, which gives it a decidedly male point of view (he attributes meeting Alex to bad luck). Dan is initially compassionate when Alex attempts suicide to keep him from leaving, but increasingly he sees her only as the enemy and has no insight into her psyche whatsoever. While some reviewers have praised the play's actors (they are good, but in our opinion, Douglas and Close, as well as Anne Archer as Beth, still win hands down), the play, and production, has drawn largely negative reactions from UK theatre critics (who tisk tisk that Trevor Nunn would deign to do it). But the [Daily Beast's Nico Hines](#) found it "exhilarating" and predicts a Broadway transfer given the New York setting.

The film's ending was pure horror movie. Alex intrudes menacingly into Dan's home; he strangles her in a bathtub; and, after sinking in her bubbles, she suddenly lurches up, knife in hand, and is shot by wife Beth.

In contrast, the play's ending seeks to make Alex more tragic than villainous. Haunting fragments of Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* play throughout the production, suggesting Alex's own view of herself as the victim of a man who had made her pregnant and left her (Cio Cio San abandoned, with child, by Lieutenant Pinkerton). In the dramatic final scene, dressed in a brilliantly colored kimono, surrounded by a blazing red sun, Alex commits suicide by sword to the swelling chords of *Butterfly's* final aria—the ending in the original screenplay.

But importing one of the most emotional moments in opera cannot revive the soap opera that is *Fatal Attraction*. The story worked better in the film as a fast-paced, heart-stopping psycho-thriller. It works less well in James Dearden's attempt to rewrite his own screenplay as a more shaded, psychological drama.

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