A Hunk, A Hunk of Burnin' Love

Lawrence Kasdan turbo-charged neo-noir in 1981; *Body Heat* has enough duplicity and double-crossing to send Robert Mitchum running for cover. Essentially, *Body Heat* is a remake of *Double Indemnity*, Billy Wilder's 1944 classic starring Fred MacMurray as the dim-witted insurance salesman being led straight to hell by the mother of all femme fatales, Barbara Stanwyck. In *Body Heat*, William Hurt plays Ned Racine, a lawyer who ends up tangling with Matty Walker (Kathleen Turner), a married socialite who (to quote Cary Grant in *North By Northwest*) "uses sex the way some women use a fly swatter." After some intense foreplay, Ned and Matty begin seeing each other, which soon leads to talks of how to detach Matty from her husband as neatly, and with as much money, as possible. Murder soon becomes their only option, and the rest of the film plays out as beautifully disastrous as one might expect.

Everything about this film is a sensuous swirl, from the opening credits' dancing flames to Matty's wind chimes, which seem to underscore the characters' passion. The film's opening scene shows a sweat-drenched, bare-chested Ned watching flames devour an old restaurant. Our first introduction to Matty is equally sensuous; she catches Ned's eye on a windy beach wearing a slinky white dress that clings to every curve. The sex scenes are intense and passionate and high-lighted by the constant gleaming of Ned's and Matty's sweat-soaked bodies. The languid pacing of the film contributes to the lusty atmosphere; only after Matty's husband's death does the pace pick up, but even then, we begin collecting the clues so slowly that it takes a while for us to realize what exactly is going on. The fact that Kasdan could use such a faint pace for a film centered on sex, greed and murder, shows us that he is indeed a filmmaker with talent to spare.

Hurt captures Ned's personality traits (or lack thereof) quite well, illustrating him as a not-too-bright regular Joe who is still trying to screw as many women as he can. We see this as he blindly devotes himself to Matty's shape-shifting stories and refuses to take any crime advice from his buddy Teddy (a greasy and virile Mickey Rourke). His reluctance to believe Matty's duplicity is frustrating, yet we understand because Matty is such a catch and he is such a weak man. Turner is a revelation in the role of Matty, a human Venus Flytrap. Her undeniable sex appeal and throaty voice concoct one of the most memorable femme fatales the noir genre has ever seen, and Turner plays it to the hilt. The character's switch from yearning and lustful to cold and calculating is a neat twist, and we don't even realize the full extent of Ned's undoing until the end.

The writing is hard-boiled and gaudy, but the ever-so-slow unearthing of Matty's trickery is sneaky and sly, and makes the firecracker of a revelation at the end pop with built up tension. Ned's confused looks and unintelligent mumblings are seen in cool contrast to Matty's calm and fearless proclamations. Ned's pursuit of Matty is classic cinema camp, and the seemingly tired and dusty plot of lovers-murdering-the-husband is vintage Hollywood B-movie. But it works. Every double entendre and innuendo is so loaded with sex that it makes the jaw drop, and that is what makes *Body Heat* achieve the status of a classic, in all its flaming, steamy, sweaty glory.