

• Donald Sumpster dressed as Donald Neilson in the film about the Black Panther.

Merrick uses skill and taste to draw his portrait of a killer

DONALD Neilson was a killer. He was known all over the world as the Black Panther. Among his victims was the young heiress, Lesley Whittle. She was kidnapped and murdered in horrifying circumstances.

Next month a film is to be released about the Black Panther. Even before it was made, there were official protests from the colleagues of sub-postmasters butchered by Neilson during his reign of terror. There is still unease at the making of a film so soon after Lesley Whittle's death.

Ian Merrick, the producer-director of the film, has discussed the serious intent behind its making.

"It is not in the terms of exploitation a sensational film. It is a serious film. In fact, it is probably the first serious film made in England in

over the telephone and we basically agreed together that somebody would make the film eventually.

"I put it to him that perhaps it was better to do the film and get it over with than to bring it up in five years time.

PRIVATE

"Whilst he didn't object, he said: 'Just don't involve

She's disappeared. I don't know if she has changed her name or not.

"I have not indulged too much in her private life, but I do show the family environment. Her daughter made many statements to the Press and gave a lot of information about the war games and discipline."

This was a reference to Donald Neilson's military fantasies in which he acted out and photographed war games using his wife and daughter, Kathy.

Solicitors and lawyers have seen the film and assured Mr Merrick that it is not defamatory.

"I spoke to a representative of the sub-postmasters and bent over backwards not to offend

see the film before it is played in any cinemas and I'm quite happy to do so. If necessary, I'm going to ask them to come to London to see it all together. I'll do anything they want."

First reports on the film have been very good. It is generally agreed that it is a serious, scrupulously documented portrait of a killer and made in good taste.

"People have this rather funny idea about film makers — that we're all Hollywood freaks.

HISTORY

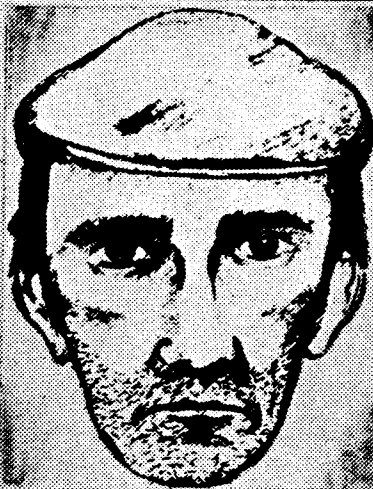
"Film, after all, is a media just like writing. You can have sensational writing, or you can have someone like

PLAZA 3

OFF PICCADILLY CIRCUS
437 1234

The disturbing TRUE story of
BRITAIN'S MOST HUNTED KILLER!

"THE MOST
CONTROVERSIAL
FILM OF
THE YEAR"
DAILY EXPRESS



THE BLACK PANTHER

An IAN MERRICK Film

starring
DONALD SUMPTER

introducing
DEBBIE FARRINGTON RUTH DUNNING

ONTARIO FILM THEATRE

● A WOLFGANG STAUDTE RETROSPECTIVE ◆ NEW CINEMA FROM BELGIUM ○ NEW CINEMA FROM BRAZIL

■ A JERZY KAWALEROWICZ RETROSPECTIVE— Canadian Premiere DEATH OF THE PRESIDENT

Continuing— THE FRIDAY NIGHT TRIBUTE TO UNIVERSAL STUDIOS

× Canadian Premiere— IAN MERRICK'S THE BLACK PANTHER and Sound 360, More 3-D ×

Award Winners: Canadian International Amateur Film Festival Senior Citizens' Matinees

SEPTEMBER

Tuesday 5

DAMNATION ALLEY - This is the first film to use SOUND 360, a technical innovation which "involves the audience in the dramatic events depicted." In the opening minutes, we find ourselves in the centre of a nuclear holocaust! *George Peppard, Dominique Sanda, Jan-Michael Vincent, Paul Winfield/d Jack Smight/ USA/1977/96 mins.*

Wednesday 6

Tuesday 26

THE BLACK PANTHER - The first North American showing of a remarkable first-feature film from Britain which tells the true and chilling story of a psychopathic killer. *Donald Sumpter, Debbie Farrington, Marjorie Yates/d Ian Merrick/ UK/1977/102 mins.* Ian Merrick will be present to discuss his film.

Wednesday 27

● **DER UNTERTAN (The Underling)** - Based on the novel by Heinrich Mann, this is a satire on the 'underling' mentality of the pre-Weimar era. *Paul Esser, Sabine Thalbach/d Wolfgang Staudte/Germany/1951/100*

of Jerzy Kawalerowicz's latest film about the turmoil leading up to the election of Gabriel Narutowicz and his assassination in 1922. *Zdzislaw Mrozewski, Marek Walczewski/d Jerzy Kawalerowicz/Poland 1978/144 mins.* (In Polish with Eng subtitles). We expect Mr. Kawalerowicz to be present to discuss his films.

Friday 13

PHANTOM OF THE OPERA (Silent Vers) The original film of a durable story of madness and the macabre remains a landmark chiller movies. Horace Lapp's brilliant piano score will increase the dark majesty of Lo Chaney's performance and add to the glit

THE EXPRESS PREVIEW THE MOST CONTROVERSIAL FILM OF THE YEAR

Inside the lair of the deadly Black Panther

HE was the killer whose exploits made his nickname as famous as that of Jack the Ripper. His last horrifying crime captured the attention of the world.

He was The Black Panther.

Now he is locked away in jail but he is about to become the centre of a new controversy. Should his deeds, which encompassed the slaughter of everyday people who happened to run post offices and culminated in the horror of the young Lesley Whittle's kidnap and death be the subject of a film?

YES says the director-producer of the movie about to go out on British screens.

YES says the British Board of Film Censors who have just granted the film an X-certificate for general release.

NO say the people who live in Black Panther country, where Staffordshire authorities are under fire for allowing the film to be made at all.

MURDEROUS

The film, made as secretly as possible in the film world, was shot in five weeks. When the crew went to Bathpool Park, Kidsgrove, Staffordshire to film the manhole through which the Black Country killer lowered Lesley, they deliberately chose a rainy day when nobody would be about.

They knew that the re-awakening of the subject would bring local protests. For the North Country killer Donald Neilson, who had specialised in murderous robbery of sub post offices, had touched a national nerve when he pulled 18-year-old Lesley Whittle from her bed and demanded ransom from her wealthy family.

Before police and the Whittle family could find her, Lesley died suspended from a wire in the Black Country sewer that Black Panther Neilson had made his lair.

The lair itself was reconstructed in Black Seven at Elstree Studios. There, 18-year-old actress Debbie Farrington is filmed lying on a ledge,

Words by
Victor Davis
Pictures by
Hilaria
McCarthy

muddled and naked inside a sleeping bag, a wire noose round her neck and her hands bound with surgical tape.

Over her in the Panther's black hood looms 35-year-old actor Donald Sumpter.

"We deliberately chose little-known actors so as not to detract from the story," says film-maker Stanley Long who has backed the project.

Director-producer, 35-year-old Ian Merrick, is equally sure that he is not making an easy financial killing out of notorious murder.

"What we are trying to show is the ugly environment in which a psychopathic killer can be created and in which he can exercise his strange domination over his family," he says. "I was concerned about the Whittle family and I rank them to assure them we were not making an exploitation film."

Indeed, one of the factors why the British Board of Film Censors left the 1hr 37min film uncut is that the Whittle family were invited to lodge objections but didn't.

PROTESTS

"Their pain is treated with discretion" said the board secretary, James Fernan.

But in the Black Country protests are already being mounted.

"Documentary films have a valid use in recording our way of life but it's sick when this film is a money making enterprise and so close to the event," says Kidsgrove councillor Arthur Martin.

"Whoever allowed it should be censured," says Newcastle-under-Lyme councillor Elwyn Davies.

Said the British Board of Film Censors: "The only question is one of taste. Is it too soon, with the body hardly cold in the ground, for the subject to be dramatised?"

The verdict lies with the public.



Debbie Farrington and Donald Sumpter act out the last terrifying moments of Lesley Whittle's life

University Art Museum Berkeley
Review of Black Panther
by Tom Luddy

American Premiere!

The Black Panther 4:30, 8:10 Director
Ian Merrick in Person!

An exceptional first feature made for only \$280,000 by a young British director, Ian Merrick, *The Black Panther* has nothing to do with the Black Panthers. It is a cool, graphic, and disturbing real-life portrait of a British psychopathic killer/kidnapper, Donald Neilson, once the most hunted criminal in Britain, who shocked the public with the military-style kidnapping of heiress Lesley Whittle, and three murders of sub-postmasters during the course of numerous robberies throughout England in the early seventies. Neilson acquired the nickname "The Black Panther" because of the black outfit and hood that he wore in the commission of his crimes. Neilson was a complex person, deeply private and resentful of the environment that spawned him, yet alarmingly "ordinary" in day-to-day terms - a family man, an ex-soldier and a fitness-fanatic. Although the film echoes Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* in one sequence, and evokes Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* in its fascination with grisly detail, *The Black Panther* does not sensationalize its case history, nor does it sentimentalize its subject. Persistent public accusal of sensationalism before and after production led to the film being banned in Britain soon after its release, despite critical acclaim for actor Donald Sumpter's insightful recreation of the character and the tasteful and skillful direction. A film not to miss, guaranteed to hold you on the edge of your seat. Following our preview screenings, this meticulously crafted and researched film should find its way into American theaters and receive widespread critical acclaim.

• Directed by Ian Merrick. Written by Michael Armstrong. Photographed by Joe Mangine. With Donald Sumpter, Debbie Farrington, Marjorie Yates.
97 mins, color, Print courtesy of Ian Merrick)

Point Blank 6:30 10:00