

M O V I E S

'Delinquent': Mature Thriller

REVIEW

*** **DELINQUENT.** (U) A terrific suspense picture, more concerned with character than cheap thrills, in which an estrangement between a sensitive teenager (Desmond Devenish), in the throes of coming of age, and his ignorant, mean-tempered father (Jeff Paul) escalates dangerously. Written and directed by Peter Hall. 1:21 (violence, profanity). At select theaters.

By Kevin Thomas
FOR NEWSDAY

'DELINQUENT" is one of those great little near-no-budget movies that every now and then seem to come out of nowhere to give hope for a truly independent American cinema. It marks a stunning feature debut for writer-director Peter Hall, who never makes a false move as he builds suspense right from the start.

"Delinquent" is a somewhat misleading title in that the word is so automatically modified by "juvenile." But if anyone in this picture is a delinquent, it's the parent. Jeff Paul's Ben is an ignorant, racist, mean-tempered, hard-drinking single father much hated by his only son, 15-year-old Tim (Desmond Devenish), who blames him for driving his mother to her recent suicide. After hitting the skids, Ben has managed to land a job as a cop in an upstate village near the town where he and his family once lived.

The brutal, raging Ben demands respect from Tim but succeeds only in instilling in his son an escalating fear mixed with defiance. For all his intelligence, Tim is too young and too blinded by emotion to be able to see over the wall of anger between them to realize that his father is grief-stricken over his wife's death.

Outraged that Tim is on the verge of flunking out of school, Ben sees his new career potentially jeopardized by any wayward behavior on the part of his son. Thus, the cramped trailer this father and son share seems like a tinderbox: You become filled with dread as you become sure something awful is going to happen be-



Desmond Devenish plays Tim, a teenager at war with his father.

tween them.

As we grow increasingly concerned with Tim, who is a likable youth of sensitivity and imagination in the throes of burgeoning sexual maturity, Hall then switches to Tracy (Shawn Batten), the daughter of the family that owns a house Tim breaks into. Tim has discovered a home video of her and has become infatuated. As it turns out, Tracy is in the midst of a major personal crisis.

As in a Claude Lelouch movie, you begin to wonder whether these two young people, attractive and intellectually sophisticated, will ever meet and, if so, what the consequences will be. Hall is breathtakingly astute at involving us in these young people's destinies and in never letting up as his film becomes increasingly taut.

"Delinquent," which boasts an effectively nerve-jangling score by the punk band Gang of Four, is a highly accomplished work in which its cast is never less than compelling. This is one suspense picture that gives way to a larger contemplation of the interplay of fate and emotion. ■