

The Wolfe Pack  
The Nero Wolfe  
Literary Society

# A NERO WOLFE MYSTERY

## Famous detective Nero Wolfe takes on murder in *The Golden Spiders*

## The Reviews

A&E's mystery movie that is smart, witty and eminently watchable

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If the painstaking replication of Nero Wolfe's celebrated townhouse on West 35th Street isn't enough to convince you that the latest dramatization of Rex Stout's grandly proportioned, eccentric, epicurean private detective is in good hands, then Wolfe's first articulate snarl at Lt. Cramer of Homicide should suffice.

The language is pure Wolfe and its delivery, by the superb actor Maury Chaykin, is smooth and measured, with just the requisite bite. It is at this point that fans of Stout's 42 Wolfe books will breathe a sigh of relief.

Paul Monash's screenplay returns again and again to Wolfe's vernacular, the choice of Chaykin for Wolfe is inspired and Timothy Hutton makes a glib, engaging Archie Goodwin, Wolfe's legman and chronicler. Archie is as casual as Wolfe is formal, as slangy as Wolfe is proper, as quick as Wolfe is deliberate. And a gallery of secondary characters also comes to more or less believable life: Wolfe's world-class chef Fritz Brenner, Lt. Cramer and his perpetually irate cohort Sgt. Purley Stebbins, and the nicely differentiated Wolfe "operatives" -- bearish Fred Durkin, pretty boy Orrie Cather and the indispensable Saul Panzer, played by another resourceful actor, Saul Rubinek.

In "The Golden Spiders," Wolfe rejects a dinner of starlings Fritz has prepared with saffron, tarragon and a red currant glaze (instead of the customary sage), accepts his lowest retainer ever -- \$4.30 from street urchin Pete Drosos -- tends to his orchids and solves a triple murder while imbibing copious quantities of beer.

The victims all have been run down by a '52 Cadillac and the killings seem to have something to do with well-off society dame Laura Fromm and an organization called the Association of European Refugees, which is being used in a shakedown racket. Worst of all, two of the victims were dispatched soon after visiting Wolfe. "I resent the assumption," he says, "that those who seek my help may be murdered with impunity!" Nothing will do but for Wolfe to gather all the suspects in his office for what Archie calls one of his "charades," where Wolfe lets fly with a marathon monologue and entraps the culprit before he -- or she -- knows what hit him.

"The Golden Spiders" -- named for some distinctive earrings that figure into the story -- isn't your slam-bang TV mystery with a climax every 10 minutes and car chases and explosions. The pacing is leisurely and the movie's more civilized tone seems a conscious decision to accurately reflect author Stout and his distinctive creation.

"When you go to the books, you find that Stout has given you an awful lot of detail you can work with," said Chaykin. "It was a real discovery to me, because I had not read any of them until then. So I read 'Too Many Cooks' and 'The Doorbell Rang,' where Wolfe takes on the FBI. (That's going to be the next one we do if the public likes this one enough.) I was amazed at the descriptions, the richness of detail on all the characters.

"Nero is so specifically written, it made me a little nervous playing him. It's both a pleasure and a burden. That speech at the end -- the summation -- was very daunting. I mean, just the volume of it. It was exhausting, but I tried to have fun with it.

"It seems to me that Nero Wolfe is someone who has built up this tremendous world of lavishness and order to protect him from the threatening world outside. Nothing can interrupt his work with the orchids or a meal, for instance."

Indeed. In "Some Buried Caesar," Wolfe says, "In the midst of the most difficult and chaotic problems, I never missed a meal. A stomach too long empty thins the blood and disconcerts the brain."

"The last thing he wants to be is a great detective," says Chaykin, "but the fact is, it's something he can do. He is the greatest."

Chaykin's performance suggests a great many things that will delight Wolfe fans: a sense of stillness and intensity that bespeaks thought and intelligence (he also works his lips the way Wolfe does when he's thinking); the manner in which he weighs his words to give them the sound of infallible pronouncements; the wagging of his index finger; the cutting tone when he says something like "Not to be tolerated!" Chaykin's Wolfe also gives the impression of not wanting to spend a moment more than he has to on crime when there are more pressing matters at hand, such as the aromas wafting from Fritz's kitchen, a book to be read or a

bottle of beer to be opened. ("It is always wiser, when there is a choice, to trust to inertia," says Wolfe in one of the books. "It is the greatest force in the world.")

Told the only area in which he did not measure up was sheer bulk, Chaykin took umbrage. "I beg your pardon!" he said in Wolfian tones. "Archie describes Wolfe as weighing 'one seventh of a ton,' which is something like 289 pounds and I'm shy of that by about 10 pounds."

"Yeah, I wouldn't want to have Wolfe sit on me," said Paul Monash, who wrote the screenplay. The veteran writer-producer (514 episodes of the "Peyton Place" TV series, the "Kingfish" and "Stalin" TV movies), now works "only when I want to; I mean, I'm 83 and invested pretty well!" Monash also produced some movie hits, including "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid." "So I have no need to work on things I don't care to. This, I wanted to do.

"My agent at William Morris wondered if I'd be interested in adapting this book. I've got to confess, I was not really a fan. I had a sort of vague recollection of Nero Wolfe as a character, but that was it.

"Well, I liked the book, but I mentioned that it seemed to me they had to be set in the period in which they were written, because these books are very much part of their time. I mean, the words that are used have an old-fashioned ring to them that may sound strange to today's audience, but that's part of its flavor. And one of the producers, a guy named Michael Jaffe, wanted it that way. He's very devoted to the Nero Wolfe books, a tremendous fan. If the film works, a lot of the credit goes to Jaffe. He kept me honest.

>"I was a little concerned about one thing: Nero Wolfe is a guy who works with his mind. Archie works with his feet, he gathers facts for Wolfe, hauls people in to see him because Wolfe rarely goes out. Consequently, this is a character and this is a film that demands that you listen. To me, it's very much like 'Poirot.' "

"The Golden Spiders" isn't perfect. The only interesting actress in the cast, Mimi Kuzyk, gets killed off almost immediately. Bill Smitrovich and R.D. Reid, as Cramer and Stebbins, are cigar-chomping cartoons (but then, they're not much more than that in the books). A few more recognizable acting faces among the suspects would have helped their scenes. The word "insufferable" should be reserved for Wolfe's exclusive use. And where is Thorodore Horstmann, the keeper of the orchids?

Quibbles, all of them. More good decisions than bad ones have been made here, such as director Bill Duke's stylish black-and-white flashbacks, the casual evocation of period, retaining Archie as narrator, since he's the one typing up the reports in the books.

And your eye keeps catching things that evoke the novels, such as the red leather client's chair, the oft-mentioned globe in the office, the portrait of Sherlock Holmes -- significant because many mystery mavens believe Holmes to be Wolfe's father.

One is moved to give the film Wolfe's ultimate, if grudging compliment: "This is very satisfactory."