

A QUESTION OF SILENCE is a film designed to test at least 50 per cent of its potential audience, a film which derives its conclusions from a set of radical feminist premisses and a film which is irritatingly unpredictable.

First, the picture will fray the nerves of every man who watches it. The male of the species is not spared in the film, either in general or in particular and the usual cinema pattern — of male violence against women — is reversed in a murder story which is as gruesome, without being particularly explicit, as any horror flick.

The plot is fairly simple: a

Silent witness

male boutique owner catches a housewife shoplifting. Instead of submitting quietly she, along with two women she has never met before, does the man to death with a variety of handy implements. It is, to the male police and male court, the epitome of the senseless crime. The film's achievement is to show that the crime is anything but senseless and is, in fact, the logical outcome of oppression — logical, that is, according to the aforementioned feminist principles.

The picture revolves around a

By IAN BELL

woman psychiatrist, an expert witness appointed by the court to decide whether the three women are fit to plead. It is through her dawning understanding of the women's lives — their motives, in effect, for murder — that the drama develops.

The "silence" of the title refers to the near-catatonia of Christine, the shop-lifter, after she is arrested. It transpires, however, that Christine has said very little for years because no one has been listening and her chief contribution to the film's

soundtrack is laughter, mostly derisive.

There is a good deal of humour of the blackest kind and male behaviour is held up to a dozen kinds of ridicule. Yet the fault of the work is the inconsistency and unpredictability of its tone. Characters give forth with the worst kind of platitudes when it is least appropriate and keep mum when a point needs to be made. Still, the film is strong enough to survive its own occasional stridency — not to mention the squeamishness (gender-specific) that its plot generates.

A Question of Silence opens on May 26 at Edinburgh Filmhouse and runs until May 29.

THE SCOTSMAN 21/5/83

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