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Thriller 'Stag' not for men only

THE hypothetical that propels "Stag," Friday's HBO World Premiere movie, is simple: What if they gave a party and somebody died? "Stag," whose stars include Mario Van Peebles, Ben Gazzara, Andrew McCarthy and singer Taylor Dayne, is about a stag party populated by 10 men, a couple of strippers and their male escort. Midway through the evening, an accident leaves one person dead, and the rest wondering whether to report it. As time passes, the body count rises.



**DAVID
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Written by Evan Tylor and Pat Bermel (based on a story by Jason Schombing) and directed by Gavin Wilding, "Stag" is the latest movie acquired and unveiled by HBO before its premiere in theaters or video stores. Some of

these movies have been clunkers; others have been interesting and inventive.

A few of them have given memorably strong roles to actresses still in search of their big break. "The Last Seduction," one very powerful HBO World Premiere movie, turned Linda Fiorentino into a star (though "Jade," her next starring role, may have reversed the effect), "Freeway" showed just how wild Reese Witherspoon could get on film, and "Normal Life" gave Ashley Judd a murderous role that remains one of her best efforts.

In "Stag," Dayne is the central female — and while her crossover from the pop charts to film drama isn't as high-profile as Courtney Love's in



A PEELING PERFORMANCE: Singer Taylor Dayne plays a stripper in the HBO film.

★★½

STAG, Friday, 10 o'clock, HBO.

"The People Vs. Larry Flynt," Dayne certainly demonstrates some promise and range.

From an initial partial striptease to some intimate teasing with groom-to-be Victor (John Stockwell), Dayne's Serena appears at first to be no more than a sex-appeal role. However, when the party turns deadly, Dayne is called on to show other dimensions, which she does admirably, adding to HBO's pantheon of powerful leading ladies.

Filmed on location in Old Brookville, L.I., "Stag" escalates into a character study in which both the characters and plot twists may surprise you. McCarthy's sleazy drug dealer has lots of unexpected edges, and both Kevin Dillon's Gulf War vet and Van Peebles' slick lawyer are more complex than they first appear.

There comes a point where you don't have any idea how the writers, in any satisfying way, can escape the corner into which they've painted themselves. I'm not sure they do — but by the time the party's over, there's been enough action that it doesn't matter that much.