

Movie Review: Inside Man

Written by {ga=mitch}

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Spike Lee has never attempted to do a movie that was considered “main stream”. After watching “Inside Man”, it is clear that he needs to do more. With this, Lee has given us the most intelligent heist movie since “The Thomas Crown Affair”, headlined by two exemplary performances from Denzel Washington and Clive Owen.

“My name is Dalton Russell. Pay strict attention to what I say because I choose my words carefully and I never repeat myself.”

Lee starts out with Owen speaking directly into the camera, immediately establishing his character’s name (which is not repeated again) and his cock-sure attitude. But where is he? It looks like he may be in jail, but one can’t be sure. In any case, in that brief narration, Dalton explains the “who, what, when, and where” of the caper. The “why” is intentionally bypassed, and the “how” is explained by the rest of the movie.

Dalton and his three accomplices enter a Manhattan bank dressed as painters, and manage to quickly disable the cameras, disarm the guards, and barricade the doors. Hostages are rounded up and forced to undress, replacing their clothing with identical painters garb worn by the robbers, including masks and hoods. From there, the foursome gets to work.

But doing what? For the most part, it appears they are just there to toy with the police. Enter negotiator Keith Frazier (Washington). He is a character we’ve seen too many times in these types of movies: an ‘honest cop’ distracted by a corrupt force, a pending Internal Affairs investigation, and a nagging girlfriend with a worthless brother living with her. Add to that the obligatory gun happy semi-nazi SWAT officer (Willem Dafoe), and you’ve got the makings of a cookie-cutter cops and robbers movie.

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Except that Lee, Washington, and Owen take “Inside Man” to an entirely different level. Both Washington and Owen are cool and commanding; never getting overwhelmed or upset. This is a chess game between two masters, and neither of them is sweating. But Frazier is at the disadvantage because he, like the audience, doesn't have enough information about what's going on. The people that do know much more than they are saying are Christopher Plummer as the owner of the bank, and Jodie Foster as a shadowy power broker he calls upon once he learns of the standoff. There is something Plummer has in a safe deposit box that he wants to remain secret, and he hires Foster to make it so.

Her character is never really fleshed out; but it becomes apparent that she makes her living basically via blackmail...or to word it another way, she “trades favors” with the rich and powerful. She's able to quickly get a meeting with the Mayor of New York, and cajoles him into taking her to the scene, where she is given carte blanche to negotiate with the robbers free from police involvement, to the extent of being granted a face to face meeting with Dalton.

Even after her attempts, the motives remain unclear. Bundles of money remain untouched, so is it a kidnapping? But if it is; what are their demands other than the standard request of “a bus and a plane”?

To add to the confusion for the viewer, the scenes are interspersed with time shifted interviews at the police station with Frazier and his partner grilling some of the former (?) hostages, who are still in their painters' outfits. The sepia bleached film adds a surrealistic touch as Washington banter with the traumatized victims, and also asks rather leading/offensive questions about their possible involvement. Since this appears to be after the siege ended, are the robbers dead? Escaped? Are they still in the bank with other hostages? You have no idea until what is perhaps the fifth or sixth interview; where the plot twists start somewhat untangling.

In most of these types of movies, the filmmaker clearly establishes which party you are going to “root for”. Lee brilliantly avoids that trap by making both lead

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characters likable and at the same time mysterious enough that you think they might be hiding something. Is Dalton nothing more than a Hans Gruber (from "Die Hard") level scumbag? Is Frazier really an honest cop, or is he hiding something? You never really know for certain, and that fact, along with the crisp script from Russell Gerwitz keeps you mesmerized throughout.

What keeps this from being a Great Film, however, are numerous flaws that could have and should have easily been avoided. Superfluous scenes such as showing a fantasy scene of what the SWAT team thinks will go down when they storm the building add nothing to the story. What's worse is that Spike Lee just can't help himself; so we have the obligatory "white cops are racists" scenes involving a beat cop that can't get through a conversation with Washington without throwing in some racial slurs, and the brutal handling of one released hostage that appears to be Arab.

Additionally, to call Jodie Foster's character two-dimensional would be an insult to cartoons everywhere. She is a great actress, but she is completely wasted here in a part that could have easily been eliminated. In an attempt to make her "Madeline White" character a mysterious cipher, all Lee has really managed to do was make her boring.

But if Lee was unable to get a good performance out of Foster, he more than made up for it with Owen and Washington. Dalton is every bit as clever and smooth as Pierce Brosnan's Thomas Crown, but without the smirk...and without the menace Owen showed as the misogynistic doctor in "Closer". With fifteen minutes left in the movie, I still didn't know whether or not I was 'fer him or agin him'. As for Washington, after a few minutes watching him, I figured I was in for the same type of thing I saw in "John Q", "The Siege" or "Man on Fire". I was wrong. His work as Frazier is as complex and compelling performance as I've seen from him since "Remember the Titans"; a fully three-dimensional character whose behavior and reactions could not be predicted.

So don't let the flaws fool you...these are only minor issues that you'll think about

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after the movie is over. Because during it, you'll be too busy trying to figure out what's going on, and what's going to happen next. And even if you're smart enough to get most of it figured out, there are a few surprises left that you won't see coming, but do not come across as contrived.

Two actors and a director at the top of their games have produced a well spent afternoon at the movie theatre.

My Grade: Brian Sipe (3 ½ footballs).