

Movie Review: 21

Written by {ga=mitch}

Saturday, April 05 2008 7:00 PM -

You've all probably heard something about this. Back in the mid-nineties, a team of kids from MIT in Boston took Las Vegas for millions of dollars playing blackjack as part of an elaborate card team. The book ("Bringing Down The House") about it is excellent, and now the story has been brought to the silver screen, and stars Kevin Spacey and Laurence Fishburne amongst others. We dispatched Mitch to the theaters to give us the 411 on this one.



"21" has two things going against it right off the bat. The first is that it's another in the total deluge of entertainment we've had to endure about Las Vegas. Yes, we know that Vegas is a really glitzy, corrupt, tantalizing, and totally alluring location. But if I see one more "come to Vegas and be an immoral cretin, and then lie to your friends and family when you get home" commercial, I'm tempted to go Elvis on my own TV set.

The second issue is that it's another one of those films that is "Inspired by True Events". Translation; we took a non fiction book and made up whatever the hell we wanted just because we can.

Disclaimers out of the way, I must say that I was pleasantly surprised, as "21" is an enjoyable piece of fluff entertainment. The concept is interesting, some of the acting is excellent, and it's a fun little mindless diversion for two hours.

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The truth about the teams of Massachusetts Institute of Technology students who engaged in card counting is that the teams existed in one form or another from 1979 through approximately 2000. The movie doesn't play it that way, and it seems as if it is set in 2008, as the exterior shots certainly point to current day Las Vegas.

But in director Robert Luketic's version, soon-to-be MIT graduate Ben Campbell has been accepted into Harvard Medical School, but the dorky super-genius is lacking the funds to pay for his schooling, and eight dollars an hour as an assistant manager at a high end clothing store won't quite make it.

There's the motive. The opportunity comes along when Ben is in an advanced mathematics class taught by Micky Rosa, played to Svengali perfection by Kevin Spacey. After testing Ben's intellect in class, he has one of his students invite him for a late night session of Card Counting 501. It seems that Micky used to be one of the best card counters in the country, but he retired on top, and now has an elaborate scheme going where five math wonks work together to scout out "hot" tables in a casino ("hot" being a table where there are a lot of face cards in the deck that have not yet been played), and then signaling to the Big Player to come over and start taking advantage of the count, racking up major wins, 50% of which go to Micky as the man fronting all the money, plane tickets, and phony IDs.

Of course, Ben is reluctant. This totally predictable plot device is only used so that the film makers can take advantage of the tons of sex appeal possessed by Jill (Kate Bosworth) as one of the team charged with making Ben change his mind. You know she is going to succeed, especially after an earlier scene in the movie where Ben and his two Uber-Nerd friends are shooting baskets in the gym (badly), and are drooling as Jill walks by, lamenting how "guys like them never stand a chance with a girl like that". That always means that one of them certainly will be hooking up with her very soon.

So with Ben's libido leading the way, the team is soon on the way to Vegas, which

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is when the film kicks it up several notches in the enjoyment category. Jim Sturgess does a great job in showing Ben's nervousness on his first night, followed by the giddiness of his success, and his gradual slide to the "dark side" as the allure of money and sex take him predictably from a shy, honest boy to a slick, morally ambiguous man. Personally, I found Sturgess a lot more believable as the former. His level of discomfort in playing a mastermind trying to outsmart Micky Rosa was a little too obvious.

But maybe that's just because most people know that no one can outsmart Kevin Spacey. From the time that Spacey first burst into near cult status as Verbal Kint in "The Usual Suspects", he has probably been the best actor in the world for playing people who are not only smarter than everyone else, but who also know that they are smarter, and relish in rubbing everyone's faces in that fact. So seeing Ben trying to outsmart Micky isn't the most believable part in the movie, but it's still enjoyable as it gives Spacey one fantastic scene where Micky "comes out of retirement" and sits down at a blackjack table in disguise.

Someone who is capable of not getting upstaged by Spacey is Laurence Fishburne, who does excellent work (as always) in the role of Cole Williams, and old style Vegas Thug security expert who still relies upon back room beatings to deal with card counters, instead of the now accepted method of black listing them. Fishburne does a great job in taking a role that could easily be very predictable and boring and turning it into something you didn't quite expect...someone who you can't figure out if you like or hate...even after the movie ends.

It's almost a shame that more of the movie wasn't spent focusing on Spacey and Fishburne, as they were infinitely more interesting than the college students. Bosworth is a terrific actress, but she is totally hamstrung by the weak material, and is little more than the pretty girl tempting the star. However, she still fares better than the other three members of the MIT team, who get little more to work with other than being designated as "the crazy Asian kleptomaniac", the "Asian/Hispanic cute but ditzy girl" or the "smug preppie guy who gets jealous of Ben's success". To call those characters two dimensional is an insult to Snoopy and Garfield.

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All in all, it still manages to work as entertainment and as a neat little caper movie.

The best thing Luketic and the screenwriters do is to not get too convoluted of a scam tale going with all kinds of elaborate plot twists and red herrings...which would have sunk this film. The pacing of the last hour was excellent, and possessed a couple of plot twists that were somewhat predictable, but at the same time were written in such a way as you couldn't see them coming a mile away...only from a few feet away. Which made for a satisfying conclusion to a movie that could have been better...but could have easily been so much worse.

My Rating: Bill Nelsen (2 ½ footballs)