

Film Close-Up: Ben Affleck

by Joey_Berlin

Ben Affleck still gets teased by the media about his acting skills. But the smart and gritty film noir "Gone Baby Gone" proves that as a director, Affleck is the real deal.

BEN AFFLECK - Director Ben Affleck looks over a shot on the scene of his new thriller 'Gone Baby Gone.' CNS Photo courtesy of Claire Folger. After 15 years working in front of the camera, Ben stays behind it for the first time with "Gone Baby Gone" while his younger brother, Casey, takes the lead role. He stars as a detective who searches for a missing little girl in Boston. In the film, which also features Morgan Freeman and Ed Harris, Casey works through a secretive network of druggies, thugs and tight-lipped locals, eventually getting cornered with one of the juiciest moral dilemmas in recent memory. Ben co-wrote the screenplay, his first since sharing the Best Screenplay Oscar with his childhood pal Matt Damon a decade ago for "Good Will Hunting."

"Gone Baby Gone" is Affleck's second recent critically acclaimed effort following his performance in "Hollywoodland," signaling a much-needed turnaround for the superstar after a series of duds. His off-screen life is also back on track. Affleck and his wife, actress Jennifer Garner, are the parents of a 2-year-old daughter.

His next acting gig is in the ensemble romantic comedy "He's Just Not That Into You," scheduled for release next year.

Q: Some critics have said "Gone Baby Gone" is not just good, it's great. Are you surprised by that positive reception, considering it is your first film as a director?

A: It's very hard for me to make any estimation about it. I'm proud of the movie, I like it. But all I see are all the things I would do differently, all the things that infuriate me, all the problems. I'm really pleased though. I've heard people say nice things, and also heard people criticize it and those are the things that stay in my mind.

Q: In the film's publicity notes you thank filmmakers Kevin Smith, Jerry Bruckheimer and Terrence Malick. Why thank them for this movie, specifically? What did they have to do with it?

A: All three of those guys are really important to me. Kevin was pretty pivotal in getting my career to where I am now. I've done, like, six movies with him and there's a lot I learned just in terms of directing, from being around the guy. And really, for a couple of reasons, from him casting me in "Chasing Amy" to passing "Good Will Hunting" on to people at Miramax, I'm in the position of being able to direct this movie. A similar thing could be said for Jerry, about my career and where I am. Terry helped me out in terms of looking at the movie and giving me some notes.

Q: When you read the Dennis Lehane novel on which the film is based, did you see right away that Casey would be a good fit for this role?

A: No, when I first read the story I thought I was going to develop it for myself to act in. I wrote the script with Aaron (Stockard). Then once I was going to direct it, I didn't want to act in it. I couldn't really think of an actor that was right, 35 to 40 years old, that I could get. And also, I didn't really like having the character that age and I thought it would be much better if I made it, like, 29 or 30, because that character would have more distance to travel. This trauma could really change who he becomes. And then I thought, well I can get this actor who's an amazing actor, who's from Boston and who I can afford! Boom! It all came together for me. So that made great and clear sense all of a sudden.

Q: You have acted with Morgan Freeman before, in "The Sum of all Fears." Was it odd to give him direction?

A: Those guys, Morgan and Ed, are great. They're just such legends. Really, that I was able to work with them was just a testament to them, because they were just pros and graceful about it. They made it easy for me because, obviously, they are who they are. They certainly didn't have to listen to me. And you know, they're so good I didn't have much to say. Those guys show up and really the only thing you've got to do to direct them is say, "Action."

Q: Why did you decide to try your hand at directing, at this point in your career?

A: I was at a place in my career where I just felt like for a long time, eight years or something, I made a lot of choices based on the anticipation of what other people would think, or what might work, or how it was going to play. And it just got to a point where I just kind of ran out of gas on that. I decided, look, I'm going to succeed or fail on the merits just of what I think is going to work. That's what brought me to "Hollywoodland." And then I thought, I'm going to go ahead and direct this movie that I've been sort of a little bit afraid to do, afraid to take the leap on.

Q: Did you feel a lot of pressure, career wise, making that leap to directing?

A: I certainly wasn't under any illusions that if I made it and it was terrible, anyone was going to give me a pass. People were going to ignore it. For whatever reason, I do feel like I tend to get a little bit more, well, in the entertainment magazine world, people like to be a little bit tougher on me, I think. If the movie had come out and gone super-splateroo against the wall - it was scary to think about, let's just say that.

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