Movie Review: 'American Gangster'

by David_Elliott

Things were different in the 1970s. For instance, daily life didn't meander along randomly. It flashed by in exciting or poignant sequences of scenes, generally set to righteous music.

'AMERICAN GANGSTER' - Russell Crowe is a cop on a mission to bag an elusive drug lord in 'American Gangster.' CNS photo by David Lee. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) Ridley Scott is a director who loves montages (French for "frequently overused technique"), and he sprays these musicalized vignettes like shotgun pellets through "American Gangster," which takes place mostly in the late-Vietnam War era. One pastiche of scenes showing pushers and junkies shooting up and peddling drugs is set to brooding soul music. Another, juxtaposing graphic shots of addicts with images of a swank Thanksgiving dinner, is set to ... brooding soul music.

A third sequence gets so literal-minded (tracking the flow of heroin into New York's boroughs, as Bobby

Womack's "Across 110th Street" plays) that it's as if Scott tossed the script and directed via MapQuest.

Somewhere underneath such story gloss and the occasionally cliched dialogue is a raw and original movie trying hard to shove its way through.

"American Gangster" has a grabber of a story, and a true one to boot. It's about Frank Lucas, who built a Harlem-based criminal empire in the early 1970s by importing high-grade heroin straight from Southeast Asia.

His most notorious technique was to smuggle the drug in coffins accompanying dead soldiers returning from Vietnam.

Denzel Washington plays Lucas with an unnerving combination of Horatio Alger pluck and Vlad the Impaler brutality. The movie's first scene features Lucas igniting a gasoline-soaked hostage as casually as he lights a cigarette.

Yet he beams like a fresh grammar-school grad as he bestows upon his mom a gleaming new house, and he treats his brood of younger brothers with all the fuss of a mother duck.

There's not much emotional terrain between those extremes. Lucas even speaks in binaries: "You're either somebody or you're nobody," he pronounces at one point.

His fits of viciousness are so over the top that they can feel like parody. After a scene in which Lucas abruptly blows away a rival in front of his kin, then turns to them and asks calmly, "So, what was I sayin'?," members of a screening audience chuckled uncertainly.

Though there's no one named Corleone toiling in his organization, Lucas has his own godfather: Ellsworth "Bumpy" Johnson (Clarence Williams III), gangster emeritus of Harlem.

"He taught me to be a gentleman," Lucas says of his late mentor, as Scott (in an overly cute touch) shows a flashback of Lucas waxing some guy.

Lucas also has the law after him, in the person of Richie Roberts, a straight-laced but struggling undercover cop played with a conspicuously enthusiastic New Yahk accent by Russell Crowe.

Although Roberts eventually puzzles out who's bringing the deadly pure "Blue Magic" heroin into town, Crowe and Washington don't get a real scene together until the movie's almost over. When they do, the interplay between the two actors crackles, and it's hard not to wish the story had focused more on that part of the Lucas chronicle (the real-life Roberts actually became the gangster's defense attorney later on).

But the movie's flashes of grit and its evocations of the blaxploitation tradition (dig those 1970s superfly fashions) have real appeal, and the actors (including the ageless Ruby Dee as Lucas' mother) are mostly up to the high bar the two leads set.

And if Scott's filmmaking style is on the pat side, death by montage still seems merciful compared what happens at the wrong end of the movie's guns and drugs.

Director: Ridley Scott. Writers: Steven Zaillian, Mark Jacobson. Cast: Denzel Washington, Russell Crowe, Josh Brolin, Armand Assante, Ruby Dee, Carla Gugino, Cuba Gooding Jr., John Hawkes, Chiwetel Ejiofor, RZA. Rated R. 2 1/2 stars.