Movie Review: 'Before the Devil Knows You're Dead'

by David_Elliott

If you had to name the American film director who best used actors in the last 50 or 60 years, you'd start with Elia Kazan. But very soon you would name Sidney Lumet.

'BEFORE THE DEVIL KNOWS YOU'RE DEAD' - Gina (Marisa Tomei) has too many problems on her mind in Sidney Lumet's tough crime film 'Before the Devil Knows You're Dead.' CNS Photo courtesy of Will Hart. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) No currently working director has stacked up more imposing performances (nor more great adaptations). Probably "Before the Devil Knows You're Dead" will be Lumet's last hurrah (he is 83), and again the performances are utterly engrossing.

First-time scripter Kelly Masterson gave the cast and Lumet a big, tightening net to trampoline on, concerning a family in trouble. Old fox Lumet deals out some flash cutting and time frame back-and-forths

that, if not the Tarantino tango, are fairly adventurous.

Philip Seymour Hoffman, whose heft is more than filled with matching talent, kicks it off with an eye-peeler. He's New York real estate agent Andy Hanson, on holiday with wife Gina (Marisa Tomei), and they flourish in bed with a candor that must have made Lumet smile and think, "Now, there's something I couldn't film in 1957."

After that happy time, it's downhill for Andy. A smooth and savvy guy (Hoffman is the current tops in smugness), he contrives a stupid scheme. Serious problems have put him in a vise, so Andy cooks up a jewelry theft that is too close to home, even drafting his charming but inept brother Hank (Ethan Hawke).

Hawke is an actor often overshadowed - by Denzel Washington, Julie Delpy, now Hoffman - but is good at being gnawed and fuse-blown. The robbery becomes a gross mess, mostly due to Hank's improvisations. And Andy starts sinking in Hank's quicksand, the suction also dragging in their parents (Albert Finney, Rosemary Harris), while Gina remains fairly clueless except for one side secret of her own.

Lumet tips us off with brisk jabs of info, channels a spiraling tension, opens up the family's fracture lines. It becomes clear that Andy despises his brother, the family pet. There are moments of searing grip, bursts of pain and juicy nuggets, including the very veteran actor Leonardo Cimino as a crook who lays it out cold: "The world is an evil place ... some of us profit from this, others are destroyed."

So much ripe and realized work here, so why is the film not great? The time tricks keep us alert, but also make us see that the plot is thin stuff (a heist goes wrong and people pay). The script groans for big drama as all the heartaches ooze up, but this is not "Long Day's Journey Into Night" (a great Lumet movie in 1962).

In an echo of Greek tragedy, Finney seems to belong in the House of Atreus. With his sagging bulk, gash mouth and throaty furnace of a voice, Finney is a tragic bear. Even young master Hoffman looks a little quashed by him.

It's the quality of acting and writing that puts the film a cut above TV dramas about messy families. But the better series, like Showtime's "Brotherhood," have the time to not only show sex and violence and loyalty and agony, but ravel all that into a dense tapestry of life.

By contrast, this is a hustling shuffle-and-deal. And yet the actors are royal cards, and Lumet is a grand croupier.

A ThinkFilm release. Director: Sidney Lumet. Writer: Kelly Masterson. Cast: Albert Finney, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Ethan Hawke, Marisa Tomei, Rosemary Harris. Running time: 1 hour, 47 minutes. Rated R. 2 1/2 stars.

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