

Movie Review: '88 Minutes'

by Zachary Woodruff

The film "88 Minutes" seems to be the shortened title for "88 Minutes of Your Life You'll Never Get Back," or possibly "88 Minutes That Could Be Better Spent Giving Yourself a Series of Paper Cuts."

'88 MINUTES' - Al Pacino portrays a forensic psychiatrist in the new serial-killer thriller '88 Minutes.'
CNS Photo by Chris Helcermanas-Benge. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) A real-time thriller in the spirit of "High Noon," "24" or an eventful trip to the dentist, the film stars Al Pacino as Dr. Jack Gramm, a famous serial-killer expert who receives a phone call announcing his imminent death. "Ticktock," says the baddie, with voice disguised. "You have 88 minutes to live."

Pacino does what any bright professor would do in this situation: He runs away, holes himself up in a hidden location and sets his alarm to 89 minutes. No, wait. That's what would happen in a plausible film. Here, Pacino enlists the help of his irritable graduate students - always a smart move in a crisis - and they run around in the Seattle haze, subjecting themselves to attack while receiving further cell phone warnings. The calls helpfully count down the minutes, sparing audience members the trouble of glancing at their watches in anticipation of exiting the theater. Ticktock.

The countdown runs simultaneously with the execution of a brutal serial murderer/rapist (ice-eyed Neal

McDonough), who nine years earlier was convicted solely on the basis of Pacino's expert testimony. We soon learn that Pacino may have fabricated his testimony, the convict may be innocent, the crank calls may be coming from a copycat killer, and the story's many red herrings may be getting a little fishy.

Much of the unrelenting ineptitude in "88 Minutes" comes courtesy of screenwriter Gary Scott Thompson ("The Fast and the Furious"), whose frantic, disjointed storytelling suggests too many trips to Seattle's Best Coffee. Nobody speaks or behaves like a real human: Pacino knows somebody's stalking him, but avoids following a suspicious stranger; the serial killer is interviewed live on MSNBC in the hour leading up to his execution (even Nancy Grace hasn't descended that low just yet); and at one point Pacino flags down a car and shouts, "Stop! I'm a forensic psychologist!" (Doesn't that normally result in the driver hitting the gas?)

While tastelessly depicting a killer who slices his victims with a surgeon's scalpel, director Jon Avnet's scenes seem carved out with a rusty knife and a bad case of the jitters. The film ought to build tension and reward the audience's attention to carefully placed clues, but it just confuses. Meanwhile, Avnet artlessly renders flashbacks in the same grainy, slo-mo sepia tones whether Pacino's remembering the previous night's drunken fling with a young woman or the long-ago trauma of his little sister's death. Avnet once directed a very good film called "Fried Green Tomatoes." Now it's time to throw rotten ones thrown at him.

Naturally, Pacino keeps "88 Minutes" watchable. Late in the film we get glimpses of the great, booming acting that has defined his career. But he's noticeably uninspired, muddling through with a brow so furrowed, the lines of his forehead resembling a carefully raked sand trap.

The supporting players put Pacino firmly in Scent of Many, Many Women territory; he's surrounded by a gaggle of B-list beauties such as the red-haired Alicia Witt, who inexplicably tries to seduce Pacino in the middle of the mayhem by taking off her top. Pacino's brunette is Amy Brenneman, once a cool co-star to him in "Heat," here reduced to his helpful assistant. In the blonde category we have Deborah Kara Unger, a lioness-like actress with no role to sink her teeth into. Finally, it can be reported that Leelee Sobieski, whose impish nature has made her seem perpetually stuck at 16 years of age, now can convincingly pass for 18 or 19.

"88 Minutes." Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes. Rated: R. 0 stars.

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