

Movie Review: 'You Kill Me'

by David_Elliott

Is it really possible that Ben Kingsley, the former "Gandhi," the former "Sexy Beast," has also mastered an accent worthy of Buffalo, N.Y.? Listen to his dribbled deadpan with, "I got some great tap watah. Comes oudda da tap, right dere."

'YOU KILL ME' - Ben Kingsley plays an alcoholic hit man trying to get back into the game in the thriller 'You Kill Me.' CNS Photo courtesy of Rebecca Sandulak. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) By that point in "You Kill Me," dome-crowned contract killer Frank Falencyk (Kingsley) has left Buffalo for San Francisco. He needs to dry out after far too much boozing the hard way (vodka nearly all day). Frank messed up a major contract, and his Buffalo boss, played by lord of the granite gaze Philip Baker Hall, sends him for rehab to the burg by the bay.

Which is rather like being whacked and sent to heaven. Has any movie, even some very bad ones, not been

improved by going to San Francisco? And that is certainly the case with this slight, engagingly off-center (just a little) comedy.

No California wines can lure Frank once he gets the earnest hang of his AA meetings. But confession comes hard for a guy used to speaking through a silencer. In the beautiful city, two nice fellas (Bill Pullman and Luke Wilson) cushion his progress.

And there is a svelte shepherdess, Laurel, played as a comically dry, uplifting martini on legs by Tea Leoni. Her scenes with Kingsley give the movie its zippy sprints of adult charm, a certain pressure and percolation, like the bantering, seductive ploys of Pierce Brosnan and Rene Russo in "The Thomas Crown Affair" (1999).

"You Kill Me" is not quite, overall, at that remake's level, but the writers get some wry, laid-back situations rolling. Director John Dahl ("Red Rock West," "The Last Seduction," "The Great Raid") has a smart way with the Buffalo/Frisco contrasts, and with the fun of Frank slowly outing himself as both alcoholic and hired killer.

It is true that a few plot doodles have the chalk taste of blackboard notes at screenwriting class (most obviously, standardized thug bits featuring big Dennis Farina). The scene where Frank falls off the wagon at an Irish wake is like a mashed, stained scribble from the back of Jimmy Breslin's old desk, a column note he couldn't quite use for a novel.

On the other hand, and this is very much an "on the other hand" kind of entertainment, the notion of a hit man working (and working out very well) at a funeral parlor is dependably funny. Mostly, because Kingsley maintains his usual excellence; for a man with nonstar looks he certainly does turn in star performances, meting out his large talent in fine increments.

"You Kill Me" may be the best film endorsement of AA since the TV movie "My Name is Bill W." (1989). Despite so wry zigs and crafty zags, the story does tend to end up just where you think it will, but if it isn't

(apart from the acting) quite a martini, it sure isn't tap watah.

An IFC Films release. Director: John Dahl. Writers: Christopher Markus, Stephen McFeely. Cast: Ben Kingsley, Tea Leoni, Bill Pullman, Philip Baker Hall, Dennis Farina, Luke Wilson. Running time: 1 hr., 33 min. Rated R. 3 stars.

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