

UnderReview

A Juicy '70's Period Piece



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Amid this fall's array of small, topical dramas, many of which have carried a medicinal aftertaste, "American Gangster" comes as something of a relief. It's a big, juicy 1970s period piece, one foot in real life, the other in the movies, the preferred stance of many Hollywood crime sagas. The film gathers steam slowly but surely. Near the end, after spending most of their screen time on parallel tracks, Denzel Washington, as Harlem drug lord Frank Lucas, mixes it up with Russell Crowe's narcotics cop Richie Roberts. Separately and, fleetingly, together, it's a pleasure to watch these two stars do their job. Director Ridley Scott's saga is full of lovely supporting work, too, from Chiwetel Ejiofor as one of Lucas' brothers to an outrageously hammy Armand Assante as a mafioso, to Josh Brolin, dripping with tough-guy privilege as a New York cop on the take.

If the film, laboring under the freight of Oscar expectations, settles for being good, not great, therein lies a reminder of how difficult a screenwriter's job really is. Steven Zaillian is the writer. If there's one word never associated with the man who adapted "Schindler's List" and directed "A Civil Action," "Searching for Bobby Fischer" and the recent "All the King's Men," it is the word "vulgarian." So right off we're at a slight disadvantage, given this story's milieu of moral rot.

Lucas made millions in a tricky line of work. Born in Washington, D.C., raised in North Carolina, Lucas came to New York City and went to work for gangster Bumpy Johnson. He rose to dominate the Harlem heroin trade in the '70s when New York was, in the words of the federal narcotics investigator played by Ted Levine, "an open sewer." He cut out the middlemen, buying extraordinarily potent product direct from Southeast Asia, transporting it back to the states in the caskets of dead American soldiers. Zaillian and Scott make a great deal out of this self-made metaphor for the American death machine.

The man who strung out half of Harlem on his product also gave away turkeys at the holidays and loved his mother and found a way to survive even after the end. (In a wheelchair now, Lucas appears in the HBO "making-of" documentary on "American Gangster.") It's a classic gangster archetype, the thug of honor living by his own code of ethics. It goes back to Capone and all of Capone's early-talkies progeny, from "Little Caesar" to "Public Enemy" to "Scarface."

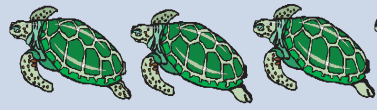
I didn't clock it, but I believe "American Gangster" spends at least half of its two and a half hours with Det. Roberts, the honest cop - and a pariah because of it - struggling through a divorce (Carla Gugino plays his ex-wife) and a long, hard search for his heroin-dealing quarry. If

'American Gangster'

Running Time: 2 hour 37 min.

Rated R (violence, pervasive drug content and language, nudity and sexuality)
Directed by Ridley Scott

Rating:



(out of 4 manatee)

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the script feels like a bit of a see-saw, it's because Zaillian combined two separate scripts, one told from Lucas' viewpoint, the other from Roberts'. Only half-kidding, the writer told Script magazine that "it almost became a matter of dropping every other scene from each."

The structure is solid and there's nary a moment of narrative confusion. But I wish the movie was more about Lucas, and that Lucas emerged as a fuller, more frightening paradox. Washington is never less than compelling, but sometimes you sense the actor straining for that stone-cold-killer glare that does not come naturally. Lucas does all sorts of terrible things to people in the film's version of a real-life story, but Zaillian and Scott get their hands only so dirty. When they cut loose a little, everything snaps into focus, as in the scene where Lucas blows his stack while cleaning up his cherished alpaca carpet after a particularly bloody incident. At moments like this, the filmmakers stop trying to inflate their story into a treatise on American gangsterism and concentrate on the details that reveal all about one particular gangster, coping with a mess.

The movie-movie material in "American Gangster" involves scenes of Lucas and his dear old mother (Ruby Dee), or the square-off with rival dealer Nicky Barnes (Cuba Gooding Jr., in a role that may have been larger a couple of drafts ago), or the meetings with the smooth, silky Dominic Cattano, played by Assante. They're engaging; they're also familiar verging on derivative. It's the Roberts half of the story that feels fresher and more completely realized, because it's less hung up on presenting an archetype.

There are times you feel "American Gangster" is doing the old Hollywood shuffle, using a white character to sell a black man's story. But this is where actors come in. As with the simmering encounter between Robert De Niro and Al Pacino in "Heat," the conversation at the climax of "American Gangster" between Washington and Crowe may not be enough for some audiences expecting literal fireworks. But these two are so great together, so pleased to share each other's on-screen company, why complain?

On a technical level, the film is extremely well-made, with cinematographer Harris Savides' desaturated color scheme a world apart from the '70s universe he helped fashion in "Zodiac." Scott may not have been the best choice for this material. Neither, probably, was Zaillian. But craftsmanly, clear-headed genre storytelling is not easily achieved in any genre. While you may wish the superlatively talented cast of "American Gangster" had a classic to show for their efforts, a good modern gangster film is its own reward.



Asolo's Tale of Two Cities

Carol and Glenn Swope
Contributing Writers

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times..."

This is the opening line of one of literature's greatest novels. It was the



best of times for the Manatee/Sarasota theater-goers who witnessed the birth of a new musical. We wondered how this was going to work. To prepare, we re-read the entire 374 pages of Charles Dickens' intricate tale of the lethal blend of love and hate. We were not convinced this could be boiled down to the essence of Dickens' complex message. We were rewarded with an extremely well-crafted product which deserves a chance on the famed Avenue.

Jill Santoriello has created the book, the music, and the lyrics to this piece. She has chosen well from Dickens' long tale, making some interesting compressions of time, never over-stating any scene to boredom. Santoriello says she has worked over this piece for 20 years. In that length of time one could lose any spontaneous feel; she did not. It never drags.

She states that her message is that, in the midst of all horrors, love has the power to change the world. Often this power of love is misunderstood. Some have seen Sydney Carton's interest in Lucie as a love triangle. He did love her. But he came to love her family in its completeness, to be willing to give his life that her whole family would stand and represent the love he had never found.

James Barbour is the drunken lawyer Sydney Carton, who seems to win cases in spite of his debauchery. Barbour's rich baritone goes easily from somber themes to delightful points of self-deprecating humor. He captured the pathos of experi-

encing love from a distance and a reflection on a wasted life. Lucie, played by Jessica Rush, possessed a beautiful, sweet voice that fit the character as painted by Santoriello. However, we felt that Lucie was a much stronger woman than she was portrayed. We would have preferred Ms. Santoriello give her more determination.

Grave digger Jerry Cruncher was wonderfully portrayed by Craig Bennett as the low-life who could nevertheless be trusted. Sydney Carton accepted the best of him despite his seamy side. Madame Defarge, played by Natalie Toro, embodies the corrosive disintegration of hate. She hated with good reason, but then it went beyond reason to entangle even the innocent. Toro's powerful voice extracts all the venom from Santoriello's impressive music. History shows us the excesses of the revolution, and the musical portrays Defarge being killed by her out-of-control hate.

Several children in the play had to come through in important roles, and they certainly did. Everyone in the cast contributed to the success of this piece. Each had an importance to the entire story. Bruce Compton Merkel, in a very short scene, upheld the honor of Booker High's performing arts, as he sang his dying song after failing to defend his sister from the Marquis.

Is this piece ready for Broadway Today the pieces selected for New York are chosen on the basis of funding, not artistic taste. How else can one explain a musical about Assassins being in the running for a Tony a few years ago? A few years ago we sat in the audience in London with Andrew Lloyd Webber (admittedly several rows away) as his latest, *By Jeeves*, died on stage, and died again when its rewrite came to the United States.

We would like to see some changes: the macabre play-within-a-play egging on the revolution could be eliminated, except the song was good. There was too much dramatic pause on the stairway to the guillotine by Carton at the end. As we said, Lucie can be portrayed as a stronger woman.

The staging is magnificent in its simplicity. Technically it is dramatic. Michael Donald Edwards' direction is sound. The orchestra in the pit in front of us never overshadowed the voices.

This is great, powerful theater. It is at least as good as *Les Miserables*. We believe it will make it. See it now! Buy the t-shirt! It might be worth something. *A Tale of Two Cities* plays through Nov. 17. For tickets and information, call 351-8000.