Thank You For Smoking

Talent: Aaron Eckhart, Robert Duvall, Katie Holmes, Sam Elliot, William H. Macy, Adam Brody, Maria Bello.

Date of review: Thursday 24th August, 2006.

Director: Jason Reitman
Classification: M (Mature)
Duration: 92 minutes
We rate it: Three and a half stars.

The phrase “Thank you for not smoking” has become an epithet we see so often that many of us don’t register it anymore. By removing the most important single word in the sentence and titling this blackly comic satire as he has done, Jason Reitman has made it clear from the outset that this film is an exercise in irony and provocation. On those terms, it works very well indeed.

Reitman, working from a novel by Christopher Buckley, has made an engaging and sharply funny comedy about the inside world of big-business tobacco, told through the eyes of a hotshot spokesman for the fictitious Academy of Tobacco Studies. The man in question is the handsome, ingenious and utterly amoral Nick Naylor (played by the wonderful Aaron Eckhart, whom many viewers remember as the kindhearted boyfriend in Erin Brockovich). Naylor is what previous generations would call a snake-oil salesman; he’s someone who can convince anybody of anything, who can put a positive spin on the most hideous concepts, and his job is to act as a campaigner for the interests of big tobacco companies. Through the course of the film, Naylor goes above and beyond the normal requirements of corporate warfare in order to push his particular wagon. He bribes a wacko Hollywood producer into glamourising smoking in his upcoming film; he attends his son’s primary school and speaks in front of his classmates to argue for “freedom of choice” with regard to smoking, Naylor is Mephistopheles in a thousand-dollar suit.

Eckhart has a great time playing this silver-tongued badguy. Aformidably talented actor, Eckhart has for some years now been cast in character roles because of his ability to transform himself dramatically from performance to performance. From the goateed bikie of Erin Brockovich to the nasty corporate boss of Paycheck, Eckhart has demonstrated an uncanny ability to make himself difficult to recognize from one role to another. In Thank You For Smoking the actor looks pretty much like he seems to in person; he’s a clean-shaven, athletic fellow with a big smile and a lot of charm. Yet the nastiness of Naylor as a character means that Eckhart has taken intelligence and
charm and transformed them into something more sinister. It’s a beguiling performance.

The film follows Naylor’s ladder-climbing exploits as he shreds his opposition and succeeds in the cut-throat corporate world in the way that only a corrupt and amoral player can. Alienating both his appalled ex-wife and the journalist with whom he’s having an affair, Naylor moves through the lives of everyone else in the film by conniving to keep everything but his dignity intact. As everyone around him falls by the wayside, either by dying of cancer like the Marlboro Man (Sam Elliot) or by abandoning Naylor as an irredeemable slimeball, this central figure does the most appalling thing of all: he gets away scot free, after ruining more lives than it would be possible to count.

Thank You For Smoking is a darkly funny satire that aims well-timed shots at big business, corporate corruption and market malevolence, and it generates significant laughs along the way. Eckhart’s is a performance you won’t forget in a hurry, and Reitman demonstrates a flair for comedy and a well-structured Hollywood artifact. Come along and see this wry film, just don’t expect anyone to let you light up outside the theatre afterwards.

Nick Prescott