



Nick Prescott's Reviews

Casino Royale

Talent: Daniel Craig, Eva Green, Mads Mikkelsen, Jeffrey Wright, Giancarlo Giannini, Judi Dench.

Director: Martin Campbell

Classification: M (Mature)

Duration: 142 minutes

We rate it: Four stars.

Most audience members will have gleaned the basic facts about the latest in the 007 franchise by now, so I'll keep the facts here to the bare-bones variety. This is the 21st entry in the most successful series of films in cinema history, and it stars Daniel Craig as a newly-minted James Bond, taking up where Pierce Brosnan most recently left off. Based upon Ian Fleming's first ever Bond novel, *Casino Royale* is a "modernised trip back in time", if you will; set in today's high-tech environment, it travels back to the beginnings of the Bond mythology, beginning Bond's story as a "double-0" agent and following him as he earns his license to kill.

A great deal of controversy dogged this production, most of it concerning the producers' decision to cast the blond-haired, blue-eyed Craig as the super secret agent. After a series of dark-haired, steely-eyed, and extraordinarily suave Bonds, it's true that Craig represents a change in direction with regard to the "look" of the character, yet the entire film is a change of direction too (more on that later). The things to stress right off the bat, though, are these: Craig is now being rightly acclaimed as the best thing to happen to Bond in decades, and the film itself stands as a brilliantly directed and genuinely exciting roller coaster ride for almost its entire running time.

Casino Royale was directed by British filmmaker Martin Campbell, whose talents were brought to bear on a previous Bond film, *Goldeneye* (1995). Campbell came to attention in the mid-1980s, when he directed what is for my money the finest piece of television ever created, the nuclear-espionage thriller *Edge of Darkness*. Campbell proved at the outset that he was as skilled when putting together a chase sequence as he was handling exposition and dialogue; he remains a director capable of carrying off polished genre filmmaking while consistently surprising his audience. *Casino Royale* benefits from Campbell's experience; while paying homage to previous entries in the series (and keeping on some of its best-loved recent actors, including Dame Judi Dench, who again plays M) the film features less of the sly humour and exhaustive bed-hopping of the recent films and focusses instead upon the tougher

aspects of Bond's job. The indispensable elements are all there, of course; there's a hissable Bad Guy (played Danish actor Mads Mikkelsen), a stunning Bond Girl (played by the luminous French actress Eva Green), an Ambiguous Ally (Giancarlo Giannini) and a US plant (Jeffrey Wright).

The plot setup, such as it is, is quite unimportant. The interesting thing about this film is that it concentrates so relentlessly upon the ways in which 007 copes with the nastier aspects of his secret-agent's existence; we are reminded during the opening-credits sequence that in order to earn double-0 status, an agent must carry out a number of successful assassinations. Killing for the Government can be a messy and risky business, it seems, and Campbell and Craig don't shy away from evoking either aspect of Bond's duties. *Casino Royale* is a tough and adrenaline-charged film, and while it's at times quite brutal, it's undeniably exciting. Mikkelsen is an effective villain, Green is a charismatic and complex love-interest, and Giannini adds just the right level of uncertainty to the mix as an inscrutable European contact. Alongside the tough, suave and nimble Craig, the cast presses just the right buttons in the hands of its accomplished director.

While it doesn't quite deserve every minute of its very long running time (the final half-hour in particular overplays its hand in many ways) this is an ambitious and mightily entertaining action yarn, and it takes the 007 franchise in extremely refreshing directions. From the breathtaking early chase sequence to the show-stopping shootout inside a sinking building in Venice, *Casino Royale* knows absolutely what it's doing. There are many familiar elements in this film, but there are many pleasing surprises as well.

Nick Prescott.