Inside Man

Talent: Clive Owen, Denzel Washington, Jodie Foster, Chiwetel Ejiofor, Christopher Plummer, Willem Dafoe.

Date of review: 11th May, 2006

Writer/Director/Editor: Spike Lee
Duration: 129 minutes
Classification: MA (15+)
We rate it: Four stars.

Inside Man is both a tense heist drama and “A Spike Lee Joint”. What this means, in translation, is that Spike Lee, one of New York’s most idiosyncratic and well-regarded filmmakers, has this time around chosen to bring his particular brand of directorial flair to a genre film. What an interesting thing for audience members to walk into.

Lee, who sprang onto the independent filmmaking scene in the 1980s with memorable low-budget films like She’s Gotta Have It and Do The Right Thing, has had a varied career with big-budget efforts; his Malcolm X was a critical and commercial success, but Clockers was a much-anticipated film that turned into box-office poison, and Summer of Sam didn’t do anywhere near the business it should have. With Inside Man, Lee is again using his patented shoot-it-on-the-streets approach and mixing that with a fair bit of Hollywood cash, and the result is pretty terrific cinema.

The film opens with a straight-to-camera address by Dalton Russell (the busy British heart-throb Clive Owen) who tells us that he’s just pulled an amazing bank heist. The fact that he seems to be speaking from inside a prison cell is an interesting detail that he himself makes reference to, and we just know that it will take us until the end of the film to work out precisely what has happened. The way in which we gain an understanding of Russell’s confinement, and the path we follow in order to understand all of the various characters’ motivations, makes for a film with a very complex structure.

The moment Russell has finished bragging about his prowess as a bank robber, the film flashes back to the criminals entering the bank; we’re taken back to the beginning of the narrative, and Lee cranks the tension right up as the bank’s employees and customers are taken hostage and the robbers begin their strange waiting-game. Enter Police Hostage Negotiator Keith Frazier (played by Denzel Washington, a long-time Spike Lee collaborator, who again gives as fine a performance as we have come to
expect from him). Frazier, brings in reinforcements and sets up his response station right outside the bank, and the battle of wits between cop and criminal begins. This is the point at which Inside Man starts to play one of its tricks, which comes in the form of extremely clever referencing of many legendary crime films of the 1970s. The characters invoke Serpico, Dog Day Afternoon and the Godfather films; Russell refers to Frazier as “Kojak” at one point, and the film as a whole has the air of palpable tension and on-the-streets immediacy that made Dog Day Afternoon so memorable. Lee and his writer, Russell Gewirtz, are thus cueing the audience to their comprehensive knowledge of the genre in which their film is working, and this knowing gesture is one of the things that indicates that we are in safe hands.

As the film’s quite complex story unfolds, supporting characters in the forms of Jodie Foster and Christopher Plummer enter the fray. Both reliable actors, the contributions they make here are quite memorable; Foster in particular, as a loathsome and utterly corrupt fix-it-woman, sears the screen with her steely bravado. She’s always been one of Hollywood’s most interesting actresses, and her turn here reinforces her reputation as a performer of enviable range and ability.

Inside Man was a film whose premise had me puzzled as to what to expect. On coming out, however, I found myself intoxicated by the compelling nature of the story, Lee’s assured and creative direction, and the gallery of uniformly superb performances. As a foil to the impending mid-year studio blockbusters, Inside Man is deeply impressive on many levels.

Nick Prescott