

Gripping "Traffic" Is One for the Ages: Also, "All the Pretty Horses" and "Miss Congeniality"

Written by Mike Schulz

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TRAFFIC

Sitting in the audience for Steven Soderbergh's drug drama *Traffic*, I heard a sound that had been sorely missing from 12-plus months of moviegoing: rapt, appreciative silence. It was the sort of silence that you only get when a director is in full control of his work, when the actors are working at peak form, and when the storyline is so gripping that you can't wait to see where it will lead you next. Based on a British mini-series,

Traffic

is something increasingly rare in modern films: a large-scale epic with a human pulse, in which every character and nuance is sharply defined, and in which your alliances and points of view change with each passing scene. The accolades and awards already bestowed on the film aren't simply a matter of it being the best of a bum year; it's one of the best movies released in *many* years.

The film traces three distinct stories that eventually overlap. In the first, Mexican cop Javier (Benicio Del Toro) forms an alliance with General Salazar (Tomas Milian) in an attempt to rid Tijuana of its drug cartel; Javier soon discovers, though, that his partnership might have sinister implications. In the second, a pair of joshing, honest cops (Don Cheadle and Luis Guzman) attempt a bust on Helena (Catherine Zeta-Jones), the pampered, pregnant wife of a Southern California drug lord (Steven Bauer), as she tries to hold her husband's "business" together after his imprisonment. And finally, we are introduced to Judge Robert Wakefield (Michael Douglas), who has been appointed America's new drug czar by the president but who first, ironically, has

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to deal with his free-basing daughter, Caroline (Erika Christensen).

Through cross-cutting, the stories converge on each other as characters from one tale pop into another, and it's to the movie's immense credit that there's not a plotline you're eager to move on from, or one that you're not welcome to see appear. Each plot has its own set of twists and surprises – the script, by Stephen Gaghan, is endlessly tricky and creative but also, à la *The Godfather*

, rich and fully lived-in – and Soderbergh, who did the cinematography himself (under a pseudonym), gives each set piece its own unique look and feel. The Mexican scenes have a burnt-yellow hue that underlines their themes of corruption and squalor; the California sequences have a sunlit prettiness that masks their underlying ugliness; and those set in Washington have a sterile, icy-blue look that indicates drug-themed bureaucracy that fails to see the human element.

There's not a scene in the film that isn't masterfully directed; Soderbergh has made several wonderful films since, and including, his mesmerizing *sex, lies, and videotape* debut in 1989, but none with the impassioned panache of *Traffic*

Soderbergh also seems keenly attuned to his performers, giving them a chance to show multiple facets and an amazing range of emotion. That amazingly clever actor Benicio Del Toro has never before been this soulful; he's the film's true hero, a conscience-driven cop who longs to do the right thing but isn't sure what that is anymore, and his internal struggle is both painful and exhilarating. Zeta-Jones invests her initially shallow socialite with so much zeal that she becomes rather terrifying; she's like a country-club Lady Macbeth. Cheadle and Guzman come through with some marvelous repartee – their comic-relief bantering is always welcome – and there are superb characterizations by Christensen, Miguel Ferrer, Dennis Quaid, Amy Irving, and hosts of others. (Douglas is strong and effective, but he's almost too well-cast; we've seen him do his pillar-of-rectitude-come-undone thing before, and as good as he is here, his performance doesn't hold many surprises.)

Brilliantly edited and designed throughout, *Traffic* also deserves credit for its bracing, clear-headed look at the drug crisis; the filmmakers are well aware of the folly of drug busts – how, in one way or another, the drug suppliers, their customers, the cops, and the federal government all work in tandem – yet show how fighting the good fight is still noble and honorable. Your attitudes toward the drug-abuse issue are both verified and constantly changing throughout this astonishing work.

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is one for the ages.



ALL THE PRETTY HORSES

All the Pretty Horses, Billy Bob Thornton's adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's bestseller, has notoriously been cut from four hours to just under two, and boy, can you tell. The frenzied editing is close to schizophrenic; you're never quite sure where you are in a scene, or how much time has elapsed between individual shots, or even what the characters' relationships to each other are. However, it probably would have failed even in a longer cut: Matt Damon has never looked less comfortable, his screen romance with Penelope Cruz is laughable, and Billy Bob needs to learn that, when employing symbolism, it's important to actually have it symbolize something. 'Nuff said.



MISS CONGENIALITY

Anyone who cares about acting might find it tough to even sit through *Miss Congeniality*. The plot is pure High Concept – an unkempt, unladylike FBI agent (Sandra Bullock) poses as a beauty-pageant contestant to catch an assassin – and the movie shamelessly tries to have its cake while eating it, attempting to wring laughs out of the silliness of such institutions and the airheads involved with them while forcing Bullock to eventually learn respect for her competitors and discover that, gosh darn it, she likes wearing eyeliner and high heels.

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It's one of those utterly obvious, audience-pandering comedies that can only be salvaged by terrific performers, and while the film's actors have often been terrific in other roles, here they're just embarrassing. (You know something's amiss when William Shatner, as a Bert Parks-like emcee, gives the film's smartest, only sustained performance.)

Michael Caine, as a gay fashion consultant, spends the whole movie waiting for his witty bon mots and never gets them; Candice Bergen, as the pageant's coordinator, uses her typical stridency to grating effect; Benjamin Bratt, as Bullock's chauvinistic wanna-be beau, is as bland as wallpaper. (He's as dull playing callow as he was playing sweet in *The Next Best Thing*.)

As for Sandra Bullock herself, she seems to have lost every ounce of comedic subtlety she once displayed in films like *Speed* and *While You Were Sleeping*. She hideously overdoes her character's slobbiness, her appetite, her snorting laugh, and her impatience at being treated like an object. (Considering that she's one of the movie's producers, and okayed the film's predictable slo-mo sequence in which she stares down the camera and we discover what a hottie she really is, that last part seems rather disingenuous.) Bullock has now completely crossed over into Meg Ryan territory, and I don't mean that as a compliment; her every move seems designed to showcase Bullock as a sexy cuddlebug, and it forces some of us to find this "irresistible" actress all too resistible.