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Courtesy of Universal Pictures

Strike Dunham (Mekhi Phifer) is flanked by homicide detectives Rocco Klein (Harvey Keitel) and Larry Mazilli (John Turturro) investigating a drug-related murder in "Clockers."

'Clockers' strikes a chord

By Jeff Randall
Film Critic

With his eighth feature film, "Clockers," director Spike Lee hasn't necessarily made any major jumps from his previous efforts. But at least he manages to keep things interesting.

Continuing Lee's tradition of harshly realistic, mildly comical and culturally-driven street stories, "Clockers" tells the tale of Strike (first-time actor Mekhi Phifer), an up-and-coming drug dealer.

Strike's career, however, seems to be coming to an end when his brother confesses to a murder that Strike was supposed to commit. Strike soon finds himself trapped between his boss, Rodney Little (Delroy Lindo), and a racist homicide detective, Rocco Klein (Harvey Keitel).

As Strike's world comes crashing down around him, partly because of his own actions and partly because of Klein's manipulation, he must decide what is truly important to him and make amends.

Phifer is excellent as Strike, especially considering that this is his acting debut. His portrayal of a man who is forced to question everything he has learned and forced himself to unlearn as a clocker is strikingly simple and utterly believable.

The Facts

Film: "Clockers"

Director: Spike Lee

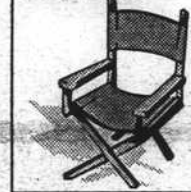
Stars: Mekhi Phifer, Harvey Keitel, Delroy Lindo, John Turturro, Isaiah Washington

Rating: R (violence, language)

Grade: B+

Five Words: Lee tells brutal drug tale.

Movie Review



Keitel ("Bad Lieutenant," "The Piano") sits on the other end of the experience spectrum with a 30-year career and dozens of feature films under his belt. His presence alone gives many films merit, and his role in "Clockers" helps to prove why. He brings the bitter cynicism and clouded racism many police officers are accused of to life.

As patriarchal drug dealer Rodney Little, Lindo ("Malcolm X," "Crooklyn") gives a performance worthy of recognition. As he encourages youths to deal drugs, he tells them to stay in school and be responsible. Lindo is both frightening and calming, often in the same scenes.

John Turturro ("Quiz Show," "Miller's Crossing") also makes a strong showing as Larry Mazilli, Klein's more genial and streetwise partner. Although his role ends up

being marginalized, it is one of the film's better ones.

But Isaiah Washington ("Crooklyn," "Strictly Business") gives the film's most memorable performance as Strike's brother, Victor Dunham. His character is a man who is trying his hardest to remain honest and strong in a world that is doing its best to make sure he fails. His tortured emotional state is relayed by Washington merely by the look in his eyes and the slight tremors in his voice.

Over the past nine years, Lee hasn't changed his outlook, although his filmmaking is getting increasingly mature and restrained. His usual messages regarding racism, poverty, drugs and violence are evident throughout the film.

Lee keeps these messages vital, though, with parallels to reality and a blunt approach that can do nothing but make the audience pay attention.

The opening sequence in this film, in particular, exemplifies that technique with a series of grotesque still photographs of murder victims and memorial murals on inner-city buildings. Lee makes sure the audience never forgets the reality of which his films are an extension.

But no matter how many messages Lee tries to cram into every scene, every line of dialogue, he still manages to hold the audience's interest and maintain the focus on the storyline.

Exciting camerawork, extremely manipulative lighting, a powerful soundtrack, and masterful pacing make "Clockers" one of the best films of 1995 so far.

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