

'Hoodlum' doesn't reach potential

Solid cast, plot can't save poorly directed crime flick

BY CLIFF HICKS
Film Critic

You know, "Hoodlum" had the potential to be a great film. It has a bunch of great actors, a fascinating theme, a great story and a powerful message. With all of this, it's a tough thing to see how director Bill Duke botched this one up so badly.

The story is adapted from the true tale of Ellsworth "Bumpy" Johnson (Laurence Fishburne), an ex-con who goes back to the criminal underworld to help protect the only family he's ever known - a crime boss known as the Queen - from an encroaching opponent mobster, Dutch Schultz (Tim Roth).

Over the course of the story, the Queen is imprisoned, and the operation is turned over to Johnson, who eventually becomes corrupted by the power as the war rises between him and Schultz. Throughout the ordeal, Lucky Luciano, the crime boss of New York, tries to play both sides and pick the winner.

To their credit, Fishburne, Roth and Garcia put on outstanding performances. Fishburne's descent from Robin Hood to hoodlum is a veritable tour-de-force, almost on par with his performance in "Othello." Roth's twitchy gangster comes across as Christopher Walken on 12 pots of coffee. Garcia's tranquillity helps round out the mix of notorious underworld figures.

So with all of this acting, it would seem like the film would make itself. It doesn't.

All of the acting gems don't come until after almost 80 minutes of snail's-pace dialogue, sparse action and camera shots

Movie Review

The Facts

Title: "Hoodlum"
Stars: Laurence Fishburne, Tim Roth, Vanessa Williams, Andy Garcia
Director: Bill Duke
Rating: R (violence, language, mature themes)
Grade: C
Five Words: Director the real crook here

that linger far too long on scenery and generally uninteresting mishmash. The meat of the story doesn't begin until well into the picture.

Duke has a habit of panning across in an attempt to make the film seem more epic, but in doing so he robs the story of what makes it interesting in the first place. The 1930s were a time full of life and vigor. It was jazz and flappers, gangsters and gumshoes. Rather than focus on any of this, we're treated to boring hallways and stairwells.

The sets all look authentic, though it makes you wish the director actually did something with them. When only 40 minutes of the two-hour, 24-minute show remains, Fishburne finally shows us the dynamic acting that should have been central to the entire film.

It's unfortunate that by the time Roth and Fishburne really start to butt heads, most of the audience is either asleep or has left, because the story line has a great point to it. The fact of that matter is that Duke just drops the ball too much with the beginning of the film for viewers to really care about the ending, as great as it may be.



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BRUTAL MOBSTER DUTCH SCHULTZ (Tim Roth, far right) escalates Harlem's numbers war with help from members of his gang.

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