

Before the Devil Knows You're Dead (2007)

In a career spanning 60 years as a director, Sydney Lumet has made a name for himself as one of Hollywood's foremost directors, probably best known for his masterpiece "12 Angry Men" or equally brilliant "Dog Day Afternoon". Now he's back with an intriguing tale of a crime gone wrong than wrong, which at the same time is a meditation on the institution of the family, the concept of power, facades people put up and, ultimately, failure.



Brotherly love

The story itself sounds exciting – two brothers, Andy and Hank (brilliant, as always, Phillip Seymour Hoffman and somewhat bland Ethan Hawke) plan to rob their parents' jewellery store, since they know no one will get hurt, insurance money will compensate their parents and they themselves can live happily ever after with the money from the fenced jewellery. Which, naturally, doesn't play out that way at all and this would be an exciting culmination of a crime gone

wrong as well as the movie itself. Only, it's the start. And when you set yourself up like that in the first couple of minutes, you better deliver - which Lumet sadly doesn't.

Of course, this movie wasn't an exercise in suspense or trying to spin a particularly vivid and exciting tale. It's a character study; nothing less and nothing more. It's also very aware of just that and this is precisely where this movie failed with me. A little suspense might have helped, actually. Instead, the director went for a non-linear narrative, forsaking the inherent strength of the basic plot and opting to focus on an examination of the character motivations behind it as well as events after the robbery. Which, in essence, is commendable, but didn't quite work in this case, precisely because of the non-linear format Lumet chose. That works if the characters are inherently interesting and the plot doesn't hinge on said robbery. You're in trouble, though, when the characters are rather predictable and you know the culminating moment of the movie after 15 minutes instead of being lead towards it over 90 minutes. I'm all for unconventional storytelling and I love non-linear narratives - after all, *Pulp Fiction* is awesome. But being unconventional just to BE unconventional instead of having that element add to the movie seems...cheap.

That said the movie does have its brilliant moments (it is Lumet, after all). Specifically the very beginning stands out, though if going by popular opinion so far, mainly because a lot of people seem to look at it as gratuitous and unnecessary – an opinion that does not surprise seeing as it focuses on the one, rather explicit, sex scene in the movie. Eyebrows have to be raised, but

it's stunning in two ways – first, in how it almost effortlessly accomplishes to characterize one of the two main character who, throughout the movie, uses people to his own advantage just as he's using Marisa Tomei's character for his selfish sexual gratification in that very

scene, with everything carefully mapped out down to which position the characters are shown in. And secondly, in the way it attempts to demystify the by now standard yet still eyebrow raising moment of somewhat explicit sex that one is bound to find in movies. Looking at it typed out like this, it seems anything but subtle and hardly groundbreaking and I suppose it is neither, but it just works. Unfortunately, it`s only one of the few moments of the movie that does work amidst a somewhat jumbled rest.

Director: Sidney Lumet

Cast: Philip Seymour Hoffman, Ethan Hawke, Albert Finney, Marisa Tomei