

MOVIES

'Big Town' comes off as a big dud instead

Gambling pictures have never been in vogue. Ben Bolt's "The Big Town," about crap shooters, coming of age and moral bankruptcy in nostalgic 1957 Chicago, will do little to reverse the trend.

Matt Dillon is small-town craps shooter J.C. "Culley" Cullins, coached by mentor Carl Hooker (Don Francks) until he's ready to make a go in the Big Town itself, Chicago. Given the name of Hooker's old "business partners," Culley meets Ferguson Edwards (Lee Grant) and her bitter husband (Bruce

Dern) and enters the wonderful world of high stakes gambling as an "arm," a shooter in the employ of the Edwards.

The script is a classic hand-me-down 'small town kid discovers big city sin and corruption,' and most of the plot is predictable. For example, he meets a good girl (freckle-faced, single mother Aggie, played by Suzy Amis) but falls hard for a sexy but manipulative stripper bad girl - Lorry Dane (Diane Lane, who still hasn't learned to act but can pose and pout with the best of them). But Lorry is

married to nightclub owner-diceman George Cole (Tommy Lee Jones), a jealous ex-gangster who runs the most competitive

Review by

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Sean Axmaker

game in town, for professional arms only.

With a couple of other subplots thrown in for good measure (one or two not ever resolved), "Big Town" gets mired in its own excess. The characters are all broadly written and the morals hammered home with the subtlety of a Mack truck. Screenwriter Robert Roy Pool, adapting Clark Howard's novel "The Arm," offers a plot so cliché-ridden and predictable that you would swear you've seen it before.

Director Ben Bolt (son of Oscar winning screenwriter Robert Bolt) should have known better than attempt such a script but he does inject some life into the finished picture. Dillon is convincing in his own way as the cocksure kid with an ego matched only by his talent and Grant, Dern and Jones push their shallow parts to the extreme for a fittingly exaggerated performance capturing the acting styles of the '50s. In many ways the film is reminiscent of classical filmmaking, most strikingly in a wonderfully conceived lap dissolvemontage sequence showing Culley shooting his way across Chicago dice dens.

The picture's strongest point, however, is it's the atmosphere. Chicago 1957 is lovingly recreated by Bolt and company,

with moody, dark visuals by cinematographer Ralf Bode and a soundtrack rich with classic rhythm and blues and rockabillycountry standards. Dingy apartments, seedy bars and smoky gambling rooms are the locations here in a near eternal night (the few day scenes show, guess who, Aggie).

We're not dealing with the most subtle symbolic elements here, but then that's not its (admittedly somewhat limited) appeal. "The Big Town" is entertaining but not particularly satisfying, momentarily stiking, but hardly memorable. The textured settings recall the studio sets of yesteryear, just as the acting, the direction, even the trite screenplay bring memories of the gloriously dated Hollywood pictures that never quite made history.

'Hellraiser' is just horrible

"Hellraiser" may be one of the year's most odious films. As one can surmise from the title, it is a horror film. But there is very little that is genuinely horrific about the film.

In order to scare people, the filmmakers must do certain things: either they must draw us in and convince us to care about the characters, or they must skillfully manipulate the atmosphere and rhythm of the film so that we're enmeshed in an almost suffocating web of suspense and feel a sense of impending doom.

"Hellraiser" fails on both these counts, and more. Instead of creating characters we have even a modicum of concern about, it wallows in cheap special effects of gore and guts.

Instead of building suspense, the film bludgeons us to death with an endless series of graphic murders. In short, "Hellraiser" hasn't much of an imagination.

The story — what there is — centers around a nasty fellow named Frank (Andrew Robinson) who somehow survived a

series of brutal tortures inflicted by beings from another dimension.

These beings — who, by the way, are about the only creepy things in the film — are summoned to our dimension when a person manipulates some magical cube. Frank, thought to

Review by

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Nathan Deer

be dead by these malicious beings, returns to our world and convinces his former lover (Clare Higgins) to assist him in luring victims up to the top floor of her home where he promptly murders them.

One of Frank's intended victims is his own brother. Frank plans to use his brother's skin to replace his own which had been flayed away by the other-dimensional creeps.

The synopsis of the plot may sound interesting, but "Hellraiser," except for those with an unquenchable thirst for gore, is more likely to bore and

sicken rather than entertain. The characters are all dislikable, especially the heroine, Frank's niece (Ashley Laurence), who spends most of the film screaming obscenities, weeping, and gnashing her teeth as she flees both her evil uncle and the vicious intruders from another dimension.

But what's most disturbing about "Hellraiser" is its essentially pornographic interest in dwelling on gory details. Any genuine concern in telling a story, or presenting credible characters, is dismissed in favor of showing the mechanics of mutilation and death.

Such stuff is not frightening. It deadens our emotions and desensitizes our sensibilities. In the place of having our emotions — much less our fears — engaged, such films as "Hellraiser" ask us to partake in a perverse ritual of bloodletting and mindless mayhem.

Clive Barker wrote and directed the film, and has the somewhat dubious reputation of being Britain's answer to our Stephen King. As most people who have seen a King film will attest, one Stephen King is more than enough. We already have plenty of dumb horror movies.



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