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**CINEMA**



Nicolas Cage (center) stars as Little Junior and Ving Rhames (right) portrays Omar in *Kiss of Death*.

**'Kiss of Death' is gritty, fast-paced**

This must be the season of the high-camp villain. First, there was Tim Roth's deliciously wicked Archie in *Rob Roy*, and now there's Nicolas Cage's equally deranged Little Junior Brown — a thug who keeps in shape by bench-pressing a stripper.

Little Junior (his father is Big Junior) is one of the reasons Barbet Schroeder's marvelous *Kiss of Death* is such a winner. It's trash the way trash should be: gritty, fast-paced and smart, with a bunch of memorable characters.

Schroeder directs from a screenplay by Richard Price, eliciting strong performances from Cage, Samuel L. Jackson and Michael Rapaport.

If the film has a weak spot, it's David Caruso, the small-screen star from *NYPD Blue* who receives top billing. At best, his performance is lackluster; at worst, it's a big yawn. Caruso is simply out-classed by the dynamic trio of Cage, Jackson and Rapaport, who easily steal every scene from him.

*Kiss of Death* was inspired by the 1947 film noir movie starring Victor Mature as an ex-con

who's turned by police to inform on his gang. Richard Widmark played the psycho killer.

This time around, Caruso is Jimmy Kilmartin, a two-bit punk who takes a fall for his cousin Ronnie (Rapaport) and goes to jail after a failed hijack for Little Junior.

While imprisoned, Ronnie seduces Jimmy's wife, Bev (Helen Hunt), and cheats her out of money Big Junior has donated to help support her while her husband is being a stand-up guy. Bev is killed in a car crash after fleeing Ronnie, and Jimmy's loyalty suddenly changes.

The DA persuades Jimmy to turn informer so prosecutors can get Little Junior. In return, he gets to see his daughter and engineer Ronnie's demise.

The bottom line: No one can be trusted, as proved by the usual double and triple crosses.

Schroeder's camera is never still as he probes New York City's hoodlum underbelly; he adds a rich, urban texture to the landscape. And the dialogue, too, is crisp and tough.

With his wild eyes, unpredictable violence and ignorant

patter, Cage's Little Junior is a trip from hell. And Jackson adds yet another notch on the weird character scale with his portrayal of Calvin, the "weeping" cop. After he's shot in the face during the attempted hijack, the damage causes one of Calvin's eyes to permanently tear. In his own way, he's as mean and formidable as Junior.

But it's Rapaport, the young actor who made such an acclaimed debut in *Zebrahead*, who takes us to the edge with an in-your-face rendering of sleaze. This guy is pure punk, a street kid with absolutely no scruples.

There's good support from Stanley Tucci as the politically ambitious DA, Ving Rhames as a scary undercover narc and Anthony Heald as the smarmy mob lawyer. Hunt is an understanding Bev, but isn't in the picture long enough to make much of an impression.

*Kiss of Death* is a Twentieth Century Fox release, produced by Schroeder and Susan Hoffman. The story is by Eleazar Lipsky, is based on the 1947 screenplay by Ben Hecht and Charles Lederer. It is rated R.

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