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'Kiss Kiss, Bang Bang' a short, funny ride of a thriller

Actors Robert Downey Jr. and Val Kilmer form a dynamic tandem as they investigate a murder

BY CHRISTY LEMIRE
AP MOVIE CRITIC

"Kiss Kiss, Bang Bang" is as much fun as the title suggests, and packed with banter that rolls off the tongue just as easily.

Robert Downey Jr. and Val Kilmer — known for their strong personalities both on and off screen — bounce off each other with the ease and comfort of an old comedy team. The delivery is often so quick and deadpan, you may have to go back and see it a second time, just to catch the lines you missed while you were laughing.

Downey plays thief-turned-actor Harry Lockhart, who unexpectedly finds himself cast as a detective in a movie screen test; Kilmer is a private eye known as Gay Perry (because he's gay, hence the name), who works as a Hollywood consultant and has been hired to train him.

Together they end up having to solve a real murder in Los Angeles with the help of Harmony Faith Lane (the kittenish Michelle Monaghan), a femme fatale/wannabe actress who happens to have been Harry's childhood crush when they were growing up in a small Indiana town — with dreams of stardom, naturally.

It would appear that all the elements are in place for a stylish, old-school film noir, but writer Shane Black, directing for the first time, subverts the genre while simultaneously embracing it. That idea alone could have been overbearingly smug in its self-aware hipness; look no further

than the title, which the film shares with a collection of reviews by none other than the late, great Pauline Kael. Instead, the result is a comedy-thriller hybrid that's silly, smart and never, ever dull.

This should come as no surprise coming from Black, who pioneered the concept of such cinematic cross-pollination when he wrote the original "Lethal Weapon," a mix of fast-paced action and even faster laughs, of two cops with nothing in common but the bad guys they're chasing. "Kiss Kiss, Bang Bang" is, however, surprising in itself — or at least in the absurdity of some of its imagery.

Just to give you an idea, this is a movie in which a woman's body is wrapped in a sheet, dropped from the roof of a boutique hotel, then shoved in the trunk of a car — and it's played for laughs. It's a movie in which a character's finger is cut off not once but twice before being consumed by a shaggy dog who presumes it's a treat — then gets a sad, needy hug from the finger's former owner. It's a movie that features a barely seen supporting figure named Flicka, seemingly for the sole purpose of setting up a "My Friend Flicka" joke.

Harry, as our narrator — "My name is Harry Lockhart, I'll be your narrator," he congenially announces at the film's start — is fully aware of the conventions of the hard-boiled detective tale he inhabits, and he's aware that we're aware of them, too. And he has such a good time playing

with them, it's impossible not get swept up in the movie's manic energy.

Harry and Gay Perry naturally don't like each other at first, but even the way they argue has a certain fondness about it. "Stop dripping," Perry suggests matter-of-factly when a soaking-wet Harry drips all over the interior of his car. "Die," is the cheery way he bids Harry good night.

The beauty of the way Perry is written — and the way Kilmer plays him — is that he's never a flamboyant stereotype; he's a veteran detective who just happens to like other men. And it's easy to forget that long before his better-known heavy roles in movies like "The Doors," "The Saint" and "Wonderland," Kilmer got his start with rapid-fire comedies in the mid-'80s like "Top Secret" and "Real Genius."

Downey, meanwhile, has always shown himself to be a master of dry, low-key humor — look at "Wonder Boys," the under-appreciated "Two Girls and a Guy" or his Emmy-nominated supporting work on "Ally McBeal." He's an ideal fit for this kind of role: a sort of damaged figure whose dark sense of humor keeps him together.


"Kiss Kiss, Bang Bang," gets too dark itself toward the end, in a way that makes it feel like an entirely different movie, and seems irretrievable. But it recovers, and ultimately goes out with a bang.

"Kiss Kiss, Bang Bang," a Warner Bros. Pictures release, is rated R for language, violence and sexuality/nudity. Running time: 103 minutes. Three stars out of four.

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Fog: Remake unnecessary

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Leigh. And it had Carpenter's then-wife, Adrienne Barbeau, in all her curvaceous glory. Shouldn't we just leave the memory of that shining in the distance?

This new "Fog" stays pretty true to its roots, though. A hundred years after the founding of a small coastal town, a thick fog rolls in night after night, knocking out electricity, destroying boats, causing car accidents and — oh, yeah — sucking people through glass windows like cat fur through a vacuum cleaner.


Trying to escape this madness are hunky fishing-boat captain Nick Castle (played by that hunky Welling from "Smallville"), his ex-girlfriend,

Elizabeth (Grace, in Curtis' old role), and the town's sultry radio DJ, Stevie (Blair, filling in for Barbeau).

Things get pretty bombastic toward the end — people and objects spontaneously combust, shattered glass noisily flies everywhere — as the town's dark history is revealed. Apparently, stealing land from lepers wasn't such a good idea.

But it's still a good old-fashioned ghost story, and you really can't go wrong with that, no matter how hard you try.

"The Fog," a Columbia Pictures release, is rated PG-13 for violence, disturbing images and brief sexuality. Running time: 103 minutes. One and a half stars out of four.



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North: Movie lacks depth

Continued from page 7B

carries a grudge against her years later and takes twisted advantage of his workplace authority.

Complaining of harassment seems futile, since the mine is the town's sole source of sustenance and even the women want it to continue thriving under any circumstances. Even Josey's own son turns against her, having given in to the vicious gossip generated to silence her.

Truly, it must have been hell. But is it possible that everyone in town could be so single-mindedly insensitive?

Actually, there are two exceptions: Glory's husband, Kyle (Sean Bean), who no longer works at the mine because of an injury, and Bill White (Woody Harrelson), a high school

hockey hero who's come back home after living in New York as a lawyer.

Bill turns Josey down when she first comes to him with the idea of filing a class-action lawsuit against the mine.

But he changes his mind and eventually agrees to take the case — not out of any sense of moral outrage or righteous indignation, just because it had never been done before.

At least his inclination is honest, which can't be said for everyone else's behavior as the film draws to a maudlin close.

"North Country," a Warner Bros. Pictures release, is rated R for sequences involving sexual harassment including violence and dialogue, and for language. Running time: 105 minutes. Two and a half stars out of four.