



Charlie (John Cusack) and Renata (Connie Nielsen) at the Sweet Cage.

Men Behaving Badly

Xmas noir

CHUCK HODES, FOCUS FEATURES, 2005.

THE ICE HARVEST: Directed by Harold Ramis. Written by Richard Russo and Robert Benton, based on the novel by Scott Phillips. Produced by Albert Berger and Ron Yerxa. Executive producers Robert Benton, Richard Russo, Glenn Williamson. Cinematographer Alar Kivilo. Editor, Lee Percy. Production design, Patrizia von Brandenstein. Music by David Kitay. Music supervisor, Tracy McKnight. Costume design, Susan Kaufmann. Starring John Cusack, Billy Bob Thornton and Connie Nielsen. With Randy Quaid, Oliver Platt and Mike Starr. Focus Features Release, 2005. R. 88 minutes.

Tying down the *Bad Santa* spot on 2005's holiday film list is this irreverent heist flick — action, thriller, black comedy. (Don't you love it when they make a movie and then don't know what to call it?) Trying to be all things at once is usually the death knell for a film, but this movie is saved by a really funny script from acclaimed writers Richard Russo and Robert Benton, and the assured direction of veteran Harold Ramis.

My guffaws began with the opening sequence, shown over a sappy rendition of "The Little Drummer Boy," as harried Charlie (John Cusack) ducks in and out of Witchita, Kan., smoky bars on Christmas Eve, looking for his pal and partner-in-crime, Vic (Billy Bob Thornton). Charlie has just successfully embezzled \$2 million from his mob boss, Bill Guerrard (Randy Quaid), but now Vic takes charge of the dough, and they arrange a meeting place and time to get out of town.

In the remainder of the film, Charlie runs into an exceedingly drunk Pete (Oliver Platt), a former friend who's now married to Charlie's ex-wife. Pete's troubles escalate as Charlie takes him for one last drink here and there before a disastrous drop-in at the home of his ex-wife and two children, and his former mother-in-law. After that, Charlie slinks around like a whipped dog, going from one strip club to another, clubs with names like the Sweet Cage, the Teaze-o-Rama, the Velvet Touch.

As a conflicted mob lawyer, Charlie's modest goal is to leave Wichita alive, with his share of the money and the beautiful Renata (Connie Nielsen), who also works for the mob. Charlie chases her around here

and there as the evening wears on. Eventually, the pace picks up as it becomes clear that a hit man named Roy (Mike Starr) is on the trail of both Charlie and Vic. From that point on, the movie turns more toward the thriller side of things, with occasional situational comedy, but no really light moods.

As Roy, Starr has one of the truly funny roles in the whole movie, and much of that time he's tucked inside a metal footlocker. T.J. Jagodowski also has a minor comic role as Officer Tyler, who crops up at interesting times. Nielsen plays the ice queen Renata to perfection. Brrr. Quaid isn't around for very long, but he's credible as a stone-cold killer.

Cusack's Charlie is a buttoned-down, uptight dude, full of self-loathing, with a moral center he has misplaced. Thornton underplays Vic so well you almost start thinking he's a good guy. Platt overplays his drunken scenes and becomes tiresome, with a few notable exceptions. Reminiscent of the Coen Brothers' work, *The Ice Harvest* will make you look at your ice cubes differently.

The entire thing is a pulpy noir with lots of killings, ably directed and written; technically outstanding. Ramis was a writer, performer on "The National Lampoon Show" before making his screenwriting debut with *National Lampoon's Animal House*, one of Eugene's very favorite films. Russo wrote *Empire Falls*, which won a 2002 Pulitzer Prize for Literature, then adapted it for HBO into an Emmy-award winning two-part series. Benton won Academy Awards for writing *Kramer vs. Kramer* and *Places in the Heart*; and his debut was as co-writer for *Bonnie and Clyde*.

'Tis the season to be jolly for some of us, but those with a decidedly downbeat attitude, *The Ice Harvest* may help you forget what ails you. Its appeal is limited by its violence, I believe. Although none of the characters killed are what you'd call upstanding citizens, I left the theater being sure (again) that comedy and murder make strange bedfellows. Now playing at Cinemark, it's recommended for its structural strength as American noir.

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