



Alicia Keys in *Smokin' Aces*

Smoke, But No Fire

Despite a spirited cast, *Smokin' Aces* confuses, frustrates

SMOKIN' ACES: Written and directed by Joe Carnahan. Cinematography, Mauro Fiore. Music, Clint Mansell. Starring Ben Affleck, Jason Bateman, Common, Andy Garcia, Alicia Keys, Ray Liotta, Jeremy Piven and Ryan Reynolds. Universal Pictures, 2007. R. 108 minutes. ★★☆☆☆

Widely thrashed as a weak hodgepodge of Quentin Tarantino films, *Smokin' Aces* actually borrows from the lesser films that followed in *Pulp Fiction*'s wake. Tarantino's 1994 masterpiece established a new subgenre of crime drama, one that explored the lighter, almost mundane side of violent crime via a densely threaded, non-linear plot. Tarantino tapped directly into in *Seinfeld*-era silliness, giving us ruthless gangsters who weren't above debating the provenance of "royale with cheese." Although several films built upon Tarantino's legacy, no crime film ever exceeded *Pulp Fiction* for the sheer audacity of its humor, vulnerability and complexity. *Smokin' Aces*, as a mere imitation of imitations, has very little (if anything) original to offer. It aspires to the style of *Ocean's Eleven* and the complexity of *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*, but falls short of even *Boondock Saints* or the forgettable *2 Days in the Valley*. It's a confused and confusing picture.

In fact, the principal joy of *Smokin' Aces* is trying to guess which actor will show up next. *Aces* boasts an impressive cast of both familiar and upcoming performers. Along with crusty veterans Ray Liotta and Andy Garcia (who continues his remarkable run of playing the same character in every film), stars of both television (Jason Bateman) and hip hop (Common, Alicia Keys) make impor-

tant contributions. As yet another gun battle ensues in *Aces*, you might find yourself jarred awake by such questions as: Is that Matthew Fox from *Lost*? (Yes, in an unbilled cameo.) Is Jason Bateman really wearing women's underpants? (Again, yes, and it's hilarious.) Do I really believe Alicia Keys as a contract killer? (Almost, but not quite.) And, most crucially, will Ben Affleck botch his accent? (Incredibly, he doesn't.)

The story within *Smokin' Aces* is simple. Buddy "Aces" Israel (a debauchorous Jeremy Piven), the hottest illusionist in Las Vegas, succumbs to delusions of grandeur and gets too cozy with the mob. Naturally, things get out of hand for Buddy, who hasn't a clue about organized crime. In order to avoid jail time, Buddy agrees to testify, after which he's whisked to an FBI safehouse (a Lake Tahoe penthouse suite). Once the mob learns of Buddy's whereabouts, it's a footrace for every crazed contract killer imaginable to claim the bounty of the "great white whale of snitches." A simple plot, perhaps. But writer/director Joe Carnahan employs the prismatic narrative approach made so famous by Tarantino, in which a single sequence gets multiple renderings from various points of view.

It's all fun for a while as Carnahan lays out the basis for his greasy, gritty tale of corruption. But the film turns ultra-violent in the middle, finding hopelessness instead of meaning, and toward the end it gropes for a conscience that hasn't been properly established. The final scenes contain a ridiculous attempt to restore innocence and sanity to the film, but the further wrongs don't make things right. **EW**

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