



Chiwetel Ejiofor and Denzel Washington in *Inside Man*.

BANK IT

Inside Man

review by M. Faust

Here's what's not perfect about *Inside Man*, the bank heist thriller directed by Spike Lee: The key to the robbery lies in a memo that in all probability would have been destroyed by its owner rather than stored; and it wasn't entirely clear to me precisely how the crime paid off.

The former is one of those things that you just have to overlook in movies—especially one by a first-time screenwriter, Russell Gerwitz, whose script is otherwise masterful. The latter I may simply have overlooked, failing to heed the warning of master thief Dalton Russell (Clive Owen) to the audience to “Pay strict attention to what I say, because I choose my words carefully and I never repeat myself.”

If you just like to sit back and have a movie wash over you, you might add to that list that this is a movie that engages your intelligence: it never goes exactly where you think it will. Me, I put that in the plus column of a movie that in every other way is pretty much perfect. It couldn't be any better than it is.

Or, to put it another way, it's as good as you might hope a film starring Denzel Washington, Clive Owen and Jodie Foster might be.

Openly hearkening to '70s classics like *Dog Day Afternoon* and *Serpico*, *Inside Man* begins as four people in masks and painter's coveralls rob a downtown Manhattan bank. Taking the few dozen customers and employees hostage, they work with cold efficiency. When the police show up outside, they make the standard demands: provide us with a bus and a jet, or we'll start throwing out bodies.

The situation is handed to NYPD hostage negotiator Keith Frazier (Washington, looking appropriately less sleek than usual), a detective being given a chance to clear himself after a pile of money disappeared from a recent case of his. Frazier sets up standard operating procedure to deal with the situation. But after a while both he and we start to realize that these thieves are up to more than it appears.

Further complicating Frazier's job is the appearance of Madeline White (Foster), an executive level “fixer” who has been employed to get something out of the bank

before the thieves get to it.

A large part of what makes *Inside Man* so enjoyable is the way it turns the clichés of the genre on their ears. But even before that part of the story kicks in, Lee does a grand job of crafting what we initially assume will be no more than a routine thriller.

Produced by the ubiquitous Brian Grazer, *Inside Man* may flash the traditional “A Spike Lee Joint” before the titles, but it's not really a Spike Lee film, in the sense of personal involvement that he usually has with his movies. Of late, Lee has been involved in making documentaries and quirky features like *She Hate Me* and *Bamboozled* that received only marginal theatrical distribution. But when he doesn't have an axe to grind, Lee has always been an impeccable craftsman, and *Inside Man* amply demonstrates that he could be one of Hollywood's top directors if he was content to do more work-for-hire.

That's not to say that his work here is anonymous: it opens with a character addressing the audience, a device he's employed since *She's Gotta Have It*, and there's the usual “Spike shot” with Washington on a moving track. More than those bits, though, Lee puts his thumbprint on this with his depiction of Manhattan characters and situations. He's rivaled only by Martin Scorsese at capturing New York ambiance, and here he seems to be amusing himself in between the carefully composed camera pans with a gallery of people you would only ever find in his hometown. (My favorite was the construction worker who knows Albanian but can't speak it.)

He also gets the best out of actors, preferring to use two cameras to capture dialogue scenes rather than having a stand-in with his back to the camera while the star reads his lines. (It makes a difference.) In return he gets delightful performances from his three stars: Washington and Foster play nicely against type, while Owen manages to make an impression despite having his mug hidden behind a mask for most of the film.

I couldn't have enjoyed it more.



Eileen O'Connell in *Losing Ground*

DARK OF THE SOUL

Losing Ground

review by M. Faust

One of the more depressing things I've seen in this parts in recent years, right up there with a drive down Genesee Street through the East Side of Buffalo, came during a curiosity visit a few years ago to the then-new casino in Niagara Falls, Ontario.

Along with the usual “gaming” tables and slot machines we've all seen in hundreds of movies, this one also has a room crammed with video terminals. In front of each was a person armed only with a plastic card with credits for the amount of money they had put on it. You sit, plug in your card, and press a button on the terminal to start the game. No pulling of levers, no rubbing elbows with other gamblers, no dice to blow on for good luck, no chips or currency to give you an image of what you're losing. Game ends, you press the button again. Repeat until you're out of money.

It's an astonishingly efficient way of separating people from their money. But what made it that much more depressing was that no one at these machines looked remotely like they were enjoying themselves. They reminded me of the cocooned humans in *The Matrix*, who only dream that they're having lives while alien machines harvest their energies.

Video poker terminals are ubiquitous in Las Vegas bars these days. One of those bars is the setting for *Losing Ground*, an arresting independent film about the human propensity for addiction. It puts us into one of these shabby roadside taverns and sits us there for 90 minutes to watch the people who frequent the place.

There aren't many, just a handful of them. If the bar has a name we never hear it; these people probably frequent it primarily because they live nearby. Several feel that they've plugged so much money into this machine or that—one fellow dropped \$3000 here just the day before—that it “owes” them; each losing game, they tell themselves, must be bringing them that much closer to a winning game.

Losing Ground was written and directed by Bryan Wizemann. The script is adapted from his play, which he developed with the aid of Tom Noonan. You may recall Noonan as the writer, director and co-star of 1994's *What Happened Was...*, a movie set in real time on a single set about a date between two office workers. Noonan is clearly the film's godfather: all of the cast has also worked with him in productions by his Manhattan theater group.

Wizemann's film is also set in real time and, like Noonan, he's less interested in plot than character observation. The dramatic motion of *Losing Ground* is slight: everyone is desperate to win, though it's unlikely any of them will. When one gambler does hit a jackpot, the emotional trauma she's gone through makes it impossible to feel any joy for her. All she's really won, it's clear, is a chance to gamble awhile longer without having to scrounge for more money.

Losing Ground isn't a melodramatic anti-gambling screed. It's about people trying to plug up the holes in their lives, unable to recognize the true natures of their problems. The script doesn't give us much back story, just enough to let us connect with them. (A pair of revelatory speeches near the end, while sharply handled, seem to be here primarily to give two of the performers a showy moment.)

Shooting for a minimal budget with digital video in a Brooklyn bar, Wizemann made one brilliant choice that defines the movie. He shoots the interior of this bar in darkness, illuminated only by some neon beer signs and the glow of the terminals. The few times the outside door is opened, the sunlight is like a knife on our retinas; at times you can barely see anything at all—though Wizemann and cinematographer Mark Schwartzbard are clearly choosing what to show us and what not. With perpetual noise from the highway outside the building's thin walls to remind us what a façade this is, the film viscerally evokes the atmosphere of a circle of hell populated by people desperately willing themselves into blindness.

Losing Ground opens a new series of independent films at the **Screening Room**, the cozy digital projection theater that has been operating for the past decade in Amherst's Northtown Plaza. (The proper address is 3131 Sheridan Drive, though it's easier to find if you enter the plaza from North Bailey.) At a time when Hollywood offerings are so worthless that advance screenings are becoming a rarity, opportunities like this and the programs offered by Emerging Cinema at the Market Arcade are a godsend to anyone who wants to get out of the house to see a good movie.

Losing Ground will be shown at 9:15pm on Friday, Saturday and Tuesday. For more information, call 837-0376 or visit www.screeningroom.net.