

## BEFORE THE DEVIL KNOWS YOU'RE DEAD

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Geez, you gotta draw the line somewhere \_\_\_\_ 2/10

Screenplay by Kelly Masterson

Directed by Sidney Lumet

Philip Seymour Hoffman ... Andrew 'Andy' Hanson

Ethan Hawke ... Henry 'Hank' Hanson

Albert Finney ... Charles Hanson

Marisa Tomei ... Gina Hanson

*"Nobody was supposed to get hurt."*

What do you say about a movie everyone loves—Rotten Tomatoes gives it 88% critics, 74% community—but everything that makes any sense to you at all says this emperor wears absolutely no clothes? That's how I feel about *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead*. From the graphic opening scene ("Awe, man, we shouldn't have to see this.")—which supporters can properly argue goes to the essence of the principal character Andy Hanson (Philip Seymour Hoffman)—to the final credits, this superbly acted, gold-plated turkey is an unrelenting descent into depravity. [If I were still a judgmental Randian, I'd have said "descent into moral depravity." But this depravity jettisons morality entirely.]

Let me give you the synopsis without giving anything away: Andy Hanson, who is married to Gina Hanson (Marisa Tomei) has a crummy job and issues with his father (Albert Finney). He basically rationalizes these unhappy circumstances to commit petty larceny from his company, abuse cocaine and crack on a regular basis, and plan a serious jewelry heist. Hank Hanson (Ethan Hawke), Andy's screwup brother, is a well-meaning, good-looking young divorced alcoholic with money problems. For mostly unfathomable reasons Andy decides to cut Hank in on the operations side of the robbery. The movie is all about the deterioration of the characters as a consequence of the (unlikely) plot.

I guess I can tell you the prospects for a happy ending for are slim.

Also let me be the first to tell you the acting and directing are first rate, especially from Hoffman. But this is one of those flicks where you see something awful happen to someone and you think what else could possibly go wrong. Then it does, and it's worse. The critics love movies like *Devil*, because I think fundamentally they've seen so many movies they become bored with any sort of formula that produces a normal happy outcome. Plus, one does get to see the full range of human emotion on the ugly side, which many of us are uncomfortable with. The problem with that "throw the wretchedness of life in your face" perspective though is an unwholesome negativity.

As kind of a meat and potatoes movie critic with a smattering of lay philosophical and esthetics knowledge, I don't have the credentials to academically dissect the issues of *Devil*. Nor would I really ever care to... one of the reasons I'd never aspire to being a more scholarly critic. But I do feel qualified to analyze some of the psychological reasons behind critical popularity of movies of this kind. First, *Devil* is a naturalistic movie, meaning "slice of life" or not aiming for any inspiration or uplift by virtue of heroic achievement... as distinguished from romantic movies, which are characterized by some projection of what humankind might and ought to be.

A key problem with naturalism, or behavioral realism, in art is it has a hard time passing muster with people who seek some sort of spiritual or emotional fuel from their art sessions. As I explained to the two ladies I watched the *Devil* DVD with, the movie passes neither the a) plausibility test nor b) the "who the hell cares" test. For a while I did care for Hank (Ethan Hawke), but the Andy character was so slimy from frame 1 that for him I was never close to the sympathy threshold. Gina (Marisa Tomei), whose body is holding up quite marvelously, thank goodness, I did manage to work up an emotion for, but I wouldn't call it sympathy. The father (Albert Finney), well, I think the writer is trying to sell us that Charles' deep, dark side lies at the causal foundation of all the Hanson troubles... but I liked him and saw no such seminal malevolence.

Another problem with naturalism lies, as I suggested above, in its tendency to enable depression. Nor have I lately insisted that every movie worth seeing (every movie that encourages some form of intellectual or

emotional appreciation) has to have a Pollyanna subject matter... for example, Michael Clayton. I actually do appreciate seeing people wrestling with their problems and coming to some sort of rapprochement: *The Old Man and the Sea*, was a romantic novel, by virtue of the indomitable human spirit; *We the Living*, romantic for the same reason. Neither had a existentially positive outcome, but both had spiritually nourishing characters.

A lot of the critics are giving director Sidney Lumet kudos for being 80 and still turning out great material. Fair enough, and he does the best anyone can do with such a sorry-ass screenplay. He puts some really fine lipstick on the pig. Speaking of the screenwriter, info is not directly available about Kelly Masterson, except Kelly is a boy. Apparently, he was considering the priesthood and has written a few off-Broadway plays; *Devil* seems to be his breakout cinema piece. No, it's not a "bad" screenplay, it simply doesn't conform to my personal preferences for movie material: if you're going to write depressing shtick, at least give me something or someone to cheer for.

And yes we can even delve into the moral issues, if you want. Part of the reason for my subheading "geez, we gotta draw the line" stems from a tiny shred of moralism I still retain from my days as a boy Objectivist (philosophy of Ayn Rand). She tended to view practically everything in terms of right and wrong; and I kind of miss some of that ethical overkill in an age where people analyze the deep meaning of a drunk pissing on the sidewalk. But, as I stated to my friends, this is a movie that makes me glad there are police and prisons for the handful of real criminals out there. Do the crime, do the time.

Call me Mr. Sensitivity. This movie is well done, it just should never have been made. The screenplay should have never been written. I am happy the screenwriter didn't instead become a priest for the purposes of molesting children; he decided to molest adults instead with perverse psychological debris. After watching a movie like *Before the Devil Knows You're Gone*, I want to dust off my *Dirty Harry* collector's set. It beats slitting my wrists.

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*Before the Devil Knows You're Dead | Sidney Lumet | Philip Hoffman*