

'Blow' Focuses on Character, Not Drugs

BY MICHAEL WOODS
Staff Writer

Drugs and Hollywood were made for each other. Each have their own way of taking people to incredible highs and staggering lows. The mutual affection developed over the years has recently taken a curious turn, though.



In the last six months, both "Requiem for a Dream" and "Traffic" have delved into American drug culture, making another movie with similar aspirations seem like an overdose.

But despite arriving last, Ted Demme's "Blow" carves its own niche in the genre and distributes a unique product that even the most veteran drug-flick fiend should enjoy.

What separates "Blow" from similar films is its singularity of focus. Unlike "Traffic," this is not a movie about drugs and the world built around them. This movie is about a man and his goals.

George Jung (Johnny Depp) wants to have a family, do good work and be rich. The work he chooses just happens to involve being in possession of a quarter-ton of marijuana, flipping 110 pounds of Columbian cocaine in 36 hours and banking with Manuel Noriega.

On paper, these events seem unbelievable, especially for a nice young boy from New England. But Depp does a remarkable job of keeping this vehicle on the right track.

"It's not the taking off part you got to worry about," remarked George's friend Dooley. "It's the landing that's tricky."

Getting high is the least of George's problems. After enduring poverty as a child, George makes good on his vow to never be poor.

His friend Tuna (Ethan Suplee) in tow, George relocates to California where he discovers beach life and bud. Since getting an actual job is out of the question, Tuna suggests selling weed instead of just smoking it.

With a little help from his stewardess girlfriend Barbara (Franka Potente) and her gay hairdresser Derek (Paul

Reubens), "Boston George" quickly takes off, developing a profitable cross-country franchise.

There's one small problem, though. "It isn't enough," George said as his friends admired their money.

Depp's acting brings a richness to George's base impulses. Each time that ambition propels him higher, Depp refuses to cede control of the film like Al Pacino did in "Scarface."

George builds his empire without violence and threats. He is methodical, focused and balanced almost to a fault.

The first time he goes to jail there is no reflection or insight. But thanks to his Colombian cellmate Diego (Jordi Mollá), George leaves behind his "bachelor's of marijuana" and picks up a "doctorate in cocaine."

Upon release, George hits it off with Pablo Escobar. Soon he, along with his new wife, Mirtha (Penélope Cruz), is handling roughly 85 percent of America's coke.

There are some intriguing glimpses into the drug life, but all are funneled through George's cold eyes.

The supporting cast is solid but lacks a player with Depp's range and skills. Ray Liotta, who plays George's father, turns in a memorable performance.

Ultimately, "Blow" is effective because it doesn't dilute the product with preachiness. The movie's only real victim is George, who is also a villain. "Blow," which is based on a true story, chronicles his life and times, never apologizing for his narco-millionaire rise or eulogizing his calamitous fall.

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'Spider' Reprises 'Kiss the Girls'

BY ALLISON ROST
Staff Writer

Just like the romantic comedy, the detective suspense genre follows formulaic plot twists, including inexplicable jumps in logic, cool chase scenes and double-crosses up the wazoo.

"Along Came a Spider," based on the novel by James Patterson, predictably stays true to these requirements, yet manages to entertain nonetheless.



Morgan Freeman assumes a role, from the Patterson-penned novel "Kiss the Girls," as Dr. Alex Cross of the Washington, D.C., Police Department. This time he begins the movie mourning the death of his partner by constructing model boats and generally avoiding anything to do with his work.

When the daughter of a senator is kidnapped from a swanky D.C.-area private school, Cross is contacted by the kidnapper, who has read Cross' books on profiling criminals.

He teams up with Secret Service agent Jezz Flannigan, played by Monica Potter, who wants to make up for her lapse in attempting to protect the school from such incidents.

What ensues is largely predictable, but some twists along the way do their part to create something other than the typical thriller.

Freeman is, of course, fabulous in his role, and while it doesn't require much, he still outshines everyone else with his quiet intensity.



Morgan Freeman and Monica Potter star in "Along Came a Spider," a redundant recap of Freeman's role in "Kiss the Girls."

Potter is the one who needs to rise to the challenge. Since her role figures to be much more vital to the outcome, she needs to show at least a little emotion.

Her performance needed an infusion of ... something. She just stares blankly at the screen no matter the situation.

Of course, the thriller aspect provides some great moments. A ransom delivery scene is worth the price of admission alone for the wild goose chase through downtown D.C. Cross runs through the streets from the Watergate Hotel to Union Station, eventually ending up on a Metro train.

While these sorts of scenes are fun to watch, they buy into the cliché. This may be attributable more to Patterson's novel

than to anything else, but the patterns are just too discernable. Couldn't they have given Cross an affliction other than self-doubt over a dead partner to overcome?

Also regrettable are the missed opportunities. Cross develops an interesting relationship with the senator's wife, played by Penelope Ann Miller, but any development along that front is sacrificed to the movie gods.

It may be a while before a thriller is made that defies these conventions. The predictability might be difficult to bear, but "Along Came a Spider" will suffice in the interim.

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