

'Lord of War' misses the mark but still entertains

BY WILLIAM FONVIELLE
STAFF WRITER

While watching writer and director Andrew Niccol's "Lord of War," one has a dueling angel and devil on the shoulders.

On the one hand, it is superficially well-crafted, and an unequivocal triumph of style over substance. The opening credits sequence alone is an example of virtuoso filmmaking.

On the other hand, the film makes the mistake of asking the audience to invest its sympathies in a character that is inherently criminal.

The disparate elements are a bit

distracting and the star-o-meter for this review is clicking directly in the middle ground. But just once let's ignore the flaws long enough to give in to temptation and praise the film simply for being an adept Hollywood thriller.

That the film invites comparisons to Martin Scorsese's "Goodfellas" is perhaps inevitable, as they share a sardonic, darkly comedic edge and adhere to a virtually identical structure, right down to the omniscient narrator.

Simply replace the mob with the gun-running industry and the up-and-coming Ray Liotta character

with the up-and-coming Nicolas Cage character — more or less as an actor again instead of the ball to Jerry Bruckheimer's chain.

Also like in "Goodfellas," "Lord of War" undergoes a tonal change in the second half. But Niccol's hand isn't as sure as Scorsese's, and the picture falters as it feels awkwardly uncertain about whether to be a dark comedy or a tragedy, with the shift in tone being too jarring and sloppy.

The flaw lies in Niccol's treatment of the main character, Yuri Orlov. Cage plays a sort of door-to-door salesman, although he sells weapons instead of poorly manufactured vacuums and his primary customers are war-torn nations.

There is a scene in which Cage attempts to justify his dealings by saying that his guns kill less people every year than alcohol and tobacco.

True, but at least those two companies are able to sleep at night by saying that their products' level of lethality lies in what level the customer chooses to devour — plus, those two products can just be plain fun.

MOVIE REVIEW

'LORD OF WAR'

★★★

When Cage sees the landscapes where he sells his guns and the obviously dishonorable intentions of his customers, he can't be convinced of their trustworthiness. He is a deaf man unwilling to recognize that there is noise in a rock concert.

A man of this low caliber does not warrant feelings of fondness. Yet in the last half, Niccol presents this man's life as it crumbles beneath his feet and has the audacity to demand our sympathy — even though the only loss that really matters to Cage comes through his intervention.

Portraying an unlikable character is not necessarily a film's undoing — some of film history's greatest characters were unsympathetic. It's when you ask the audience to empathize with their plights that things fall apart.

"Lord of War" could have been so many things. It could have been a representation of the American dream gone sour. It could have been



COURTESY OF LIONS GATE FILMS

Nicolas Cage stars in 'Lord of War,' a drama that fails to live up to its potential but one that will no doubt entertain gun-lovers the world over.

a satire on our culture of violence. It could have been an educational, behind-the-scenes tour of gunrunning. There are hints of that, but ultimately Cage's methods of business and how he rose to the top are too bewildering to follow.

Of all its targets, the only one that the film truly nails is being

heedlessly entertaining and rewarding on the surface level, which is at least worth the price of a matinee.

The film doesn't approach its full potential, but what it does, it does very nicely.

Contact the A&E Editor at artsdesk@unc.edu.

LOCAL BANDS

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"At some point, you spend so much time working at it that you can't just go out and get a real job."

Traffic seems to share that passion for music, but the members are still struggling with the idea of making the band a full-time job.

They have been together since high school, and all four of them came to UNC — at least in part — to keep the band alive.

But the guys have been hesitant to give up on other obligations.

"Being a college student takes precedent at times because my parents pay for school and want to see those grades," said Ray, the lead singer. "I am not saying the band takes a second place — it is more like a small step down."

Hines and Burns agreed with their band's frontman but seemed to have a different view on their "second job."

"My dad has made it very clear that a degree is more secure than a music career," Hines said. "I see where he is coming from, but I just have so much confidence in us."

Burns, who plays guitar and drums along with Hines, said he sees himself trying to make it in the industry but finds it hard to pursue that goal as a college student.

But if their spending is any indication, the group's drive is genuine and shouldn't be blown off because of a desire to perform well in school.

"We just set up a band room in our house, which includes a stand that holds eight guitars and a \$400 dollar drum set I bought off the Internet," Hines said. "We are on our way."

Lucky Breaks or Hard Work

Sometimes, no matter of luck or work ethic is enough.

The Triangle rap group Little Brother, which recently released its major-label debut *The Minstrel Show* on Atlantic, is the perfect example of how a band can find success just by breaking a sweat.

Big Pooh, an MC in the group, said their success had nothing to do with luck. "The people who are lucky are the ones that are gone in a year," he said.

Little Brother sold 35,000 copies of their first LP without a distributor, and the trio's DJ and producer, 9th Wonder, has worked with the likes of Jay-Z and Destiny's Child.

"Even now, we have been on the road nonstop and have been overseas four times since 2003," he said. "You have to be willing to roll up your sleeves and get dirty."

It seems that kind of ambition gets attention.

Glenn Boothe, the owner of Local 506 in Chapel Hill, said he pays attention to flyers around town and checks out other venues' schedules to see the bands that really are giving it their all.

"If I like you, it is because I saw you were proactive, not because I liked your demo tape," he said.

His advice to up-and-coming acts?

"Play everywhere and don't turn your noses up at frats."

Boothe said the local scene has turned into a popularity contest — a place where networking gets an artist further than their sound.

"If you are in a band, find some sort of job at a good bar — the more social it is, the greater reach your word of mouth will be," he said.

But it is more than just being social.

Herod of The Comas said that playing a lot of shows will pay off eventually, but that it could be years before people start to remember you.

"The industry is so saturated, and bands are always up against some sort of trend," Herod said. "It took us three or four years before things started to get better."

Although he didn't mention schmoozing as a key to making it, Herod said being nice will help.

"Assholes don't make it in this business, ever."

If there is one thing Traffic has in common with these other artists, it is their work ethic and willingness to perform anywhere.

The band has already played at Memorial Hall and Local 506, but they are still willing to take the stage at less prestigious forums.

Traffic has been booking shows since high school and already has reaped some benefits from jam-

ming anywhere it can.

"Right after we played at the battle of the bands in Rockhill, we had a flurry of local bands who wanted to network with us and a guy from a small label who wanted to listen to our demo," Ray said. "It made me giddy to think that a record label might want to produce our CDs."

Although Traffic is still an infant in the local music scene, the quartet seem to have their goals in order.

"If you are going to make it like The Comas and get a national magazine to look at you, you have to realize that kind of stuff just doesn't happen," Ray said. "We've got to run with this if we are going to get to that point."

The Long Haul

It doesn't matter if a band is at the Traffic stage or the Little Brother stage: Work always has to be done.

"I feel successful in the fact that I have been able to make music for 20 years and have different record labels support my albums," Rank said. "But I can see a lot of other places I would like to be."

That is a common thread among all the bands — there's always more.

Even Big Pooh said his group's success isn't solidified yet.

"It does feel good to be on a major record label and to have a huge machine behind us," he said. "But we are just getting started."

All three of the signed artists seemed comfortable with the struggle attached with the industry, but Traffic's members seemed to be ambivalent toward the long haul.

"My uncle tried to make it for years and eventually sold out and joined some pop group that went on tour with Kelly Clarkson and Clay Aiken," Burns said. "I don't know if I would be willing to work at something for years and then compromise it like that."

"But I guess I wouldn't mind going on tour with Kelly Clarkson now that I think about it."

Traffic doesn't know when or if it will ever just give up. But Burns said one thing is for certain: "I don't want to be playing with my friends for 20 years and end up hating them. As long as it is fun, it will be hard to give it up."

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