Crash

Paul Haggis, the screenwriter, has just come in for some notoriety recently with his Oscar-nomintaed screenplay for the acclaimed *Million Dollar Baby*. Haggis has then, as have so many film scenarists before him, decided it was time to take on the direction of his own film script (co-written with Bobby Moresco), and the result is *Crash*, an ambitious ensemble movie that tries to show the sundry facets of race relations in our country, as manifested in a few dozen people in contemporary Los Angeles. The prospectus is exalted and grand; the outcome is something less.

In a welter of interlocking stories we meet a mix of LA denizens: two cops (Don Cheadle and Jennifer Esposito) who are having an affair--and get rear-ended in a car crash; the city's district attorney (Brendan Fraser) and his waspish Brentwood wife (Sandra Bullock), who are held up by two black car-jackers (Larenz Tate and Chris "Ludacris" Bridges); a tough--and racist--white cop (Matt Dillon) teamed with a sensitive rookie (Ryan Phillippe), who accost a well-off African-American couple (Terence Howard and Thandie Newton); plus a Korean couple with something to hide and a Persian family rattled over a racial attack on their store. In the space of 36 hours, all these elements bump up against themselves--crash--resulting in car wrecks, family tragedy, political expediency, attempted murder, and accidental death.

Haggis is aiming, I think, at a complex and intricate web of stories that feed off and illuminate each other, much as earlier LA stories like Robert Altman's *Short Cuts* or Gurinder Chada's *What's Cooking*. I think, too, of what Steven Soderbergh achieved in *Traffic*, though involving a rangier geography, or what John Sayles provided so effectively in several ensemble films. Haggis deserves marks, too, for trying to seriously incorporate the ethnic worlds of immigrant Asians in his overall vision. Would that all the pieces of *Crash* fit as well together as the aforementioned efforts.

Some of the pieces of this mosaic are well-buffed: Don Cheadle (on an acting roll these days) offers a cool, sensitive portrayal of a detective trying gingerly to balance work, romance, and family tensions; Matt Dillon's nasty cop is able to show several sides of a complex character; Terence Howard moves convincingly from put-upon smoothie to an exemplar of controlled rage; Michael Peña turns in a heartfelt vignette as a dutiful locksmith--and father--whose whole life is threatened needlessly.

On the other hand, while Tate and Bridges look and sound the part of easy-come, easy-go street punks, their dialogue seems too refined and sophisticated for their milieu. Sadly, the women in the film don't fair so well. Esposito barely registers as a tough Hispanic policewoman, and both Bullock and Newton come across as little more than *nouveau riche* whiners, the former ending up in a bathetic embrace with her Latina maid.

Then, too, elements of the storyline don't finally convince. In this kind of picture, you fully expect--in fact you readily anticipate--the various narrative strands to intersect and add dimension. One major coincidence among these characters you could believe, but not two or three roaring ones; it just strains credibility in a movie that aims to be naturalistic. Also, perhaps there are two many narrative strands in the first place; lopping off one or two might have made the picture more coherent and added some depth to those remaining.

There is a very good, maybe even a great movie lurking inside *Crash*--if only it

didn't take one curve too many.
(*"Crash" is rated "R" for adult language, violence, and alarming, tense situations.*)

(May 2005)