

Clockers

Clockers (the term denotes practiced crack cocaine peddlers) is Spike Lee's first film which was not totally his invention. He co-wrote the screenplay with novelist Richard Price on whose critically-acclaimed novel the picture is based. If it makes for a more straightforward and less "daring" product, the result is no less compelling. *Clockers* is as dense and tactile as anything he has done; it presents severe themes unflinchingly.

While the film hardly has time to develop the complexities of the protagonists as Price's mammoth book did, it still strives for a richness of characterization which is admirable. Newcomer Mekhi Phifer, for instance, in the key role as Strike, lead "clocker" in a Brooklyn housing project, impressively projects a personality more intricate than the by-now standard street dude of countless "in-the-ghetto" flicks. Besides his flickerings of genuine conscience, we see some of his ticks (his swigging of a chocolate drink to sooth an ulcer) and some of his dreams (represented by his handsome collection of model trains). Also a standout is Isaiah Washington, who plays Strike's brother, Victor, accused of a murder that drives the plot. He's the brother who has "made it," his quiet dignity attained at the cost of pent-up shame and rage.

Closer to type--because they have less screen time--are Harvey Keitel as Rocco Klein, the bulldog cop who won't let go of a murder investigation, and Delroy Lindo as neighborhood drug lord Rodney Little, the kind of manic criminal who is simultaneously smooth ingratiation and stone killer. We've seen personages like these in sundry movies and TV cop shows, but however familiar, Keitel and Lindo embody them superbly.

The film has several striking looks, utilizing, for example, super-saturated color in both the credit sequence and in several outdoor scenes to attain the look of graphic art, or lighting the police interrogation scenes in a ghostly blue like the inside of a cathode ray tube. This, too, is a film one can view plainly as a mystery story, one handled honestly and deftly.

("Clockers" is rated "R" for considerable violence and threats of violence and plenty of bad language.)

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