

## Devil in a Blue Dress

Currently on D.C. movie screens is Carl Franklin's *Devil in a Blue Dress*, a film that harkens back knowingly to the tough L.A. *film noir* period of the 1940's but delivers it in a new black accent. It offers super-smooth Denzel Washington a chance to measure himself against such classic Hollywood types as Humphrey Bogart in *The Big Sleep*, Fred MacMurray in *Double Indemnity*, and even Jack Nicholson in *Chinatown* --and he doesn't come off half-bad portraying Easy Rawlins, a creation of mystery writer Walter Mosley.

Like his noir precursors, Easy's just a guy in Los Angeles struggling to make a buck (or a woman) who gets sucked into a convoluted plot well beyond his ken, all in a context of seedy types, lush mansions, and constant menace. The plot is too complex to summarize here; suffice it to say that down-on-his-luck Easy is hired to do some investigative work that gets him entangled with a sexy moll (Jennifer Beals), some lousy thugs, and slimy city politics. All this is done with style, some wit, and luscious color photography and set design which create a "black, brown, and beige" L.A. circa 1948.

What makes *Devil* distinctive from its cinematic forebears is its black consciousness. Franklin, who also wrote the screenplay, makes the filmgoer fully aware of both the African-American enclave in and around Central Avenue (that burgeoned after World War II) and of the standard segregation of the rest of the city. The former shows in homeowner Easy--a transplant from Houston--and his care for his garden and concern for his neighbors. Here is a true domestic nature rarely seen in the stylized film noir classics. The matter-of-fact racism of the era shows in Easy's nervousness while chauffeuring a white woman or hanging out at lily-white Malibu Beach. It is also defied when Rawlins, by now all business, challenges the namesake of a snooty local foundation. Neither Uncle Tom nor Super Stud, Mr. Washington delivers a nuanced performance wholly worth watching.

A word about *Devil's* violence: the film is rated "R" for violent content. There is some brutal fighting and vicious gunplay that is played almost for laughs. One trigger-happy character called Mouse (Don Cheadle), acting either high or demented, appear to be a refugee from *Pulp Fiction*. He's forceful, in a nasty way, and tips the momentum of the picture towards a grimness that most of the movie doesn't share.

(*The film is rated "R" for violence and mature themes.*)

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