

Rush

No mistake about it, director Ron Howard's "Rush" is a pulse-pounding narrative about what is perhaps the greatest season in Formula One auto racing: the year-long showdown in 1976 between the Austrian champion Niki Lauda (Daniel Brühl) and the British contender James Hunt (Chris Hemsworth). It was a thrilling contest contended by two men who could hardly be more different and whose natures are well captured by Howard and company (*now in cinemas*,).

Both the earnest Lauda and the playboy Hunt come from wealth and want to break away from their families' traditions of business (Lauda) and well-heeled aristocracy (Hunt) to race fast cars. Otherwise, they have nothing in common. Lauda's attraction to vehicles is coolly technical and hands-on—he's drawn by the essence of their machinery. Even in his scary business, he doesn't want to take risks. Hunt's attraction to racing is openly intuitive and adrenalin-laced—he's hooked on winning and heedless in his car. Lauda is appropriately contained, a bit shriveled; colleagues say he looks rat-like. Hunt is a prototype playboy, a long-haired Adonis with a yen for the ladies, the bottle, and the cusp of danger.

The core of the film traces the dramatic 1976 season in which Lauda takes a commanding points lead, only to suffer a horrendous crash at the German Grand Prix then pull off an amazing physical recovery (which includes a horrific scene of Lauda's getting his lungs vacuumed!) to come back to compete in the chase. Hunt, in the meantime, gains steadily on Lauda in the points race, and the gripping finale comes down to the last test of the season, a rain-troubled race in the Grand Prix of Japan.

Howard has cast his leads well. Both Brühl and Hemsworth personify the two contrasting types in manner and language, and—a nice bonus—they both look strikingly like the real drivers (whom we see in some clips at the end). The smart script, by British screenwriter Peter Morgan ("Frost/Nixon," "The Queen,"), gives each character roughly equal time and with equal weight to their own outlooks and arguments. Whomever you favor to win the Formula One championship may shift as you view the film, evidence of the screenwriter's gift in giving each man a convincing, rounded persona.

Did I mention it was pulse-pounding? Whether you know or care anything about auto racing, you can still be thrilled by the ample footage (shot dazzlingly by Anthony Dod Mantle) of the races themselves, where close-ups of pistons popping and brakes slamming mingle excitingly with track zooms and turns that leave you dizzy, and, given the volume, make your head hurt. Whether you like it or not, you can admire an editing job that truly tucks you in the driver's seat.

Ron Howard is both a popular and honored director, principally for films that are distinctly American (from "Parenthood" to "Frost/Nixon") but here he opts for a more clearly European aesthetic. The subject matter (a profoundly European sport), the overseas shooting locations, and the casting (only one significant American actor) combine to give a different flavor to "Rush." Howard has done Europe before ("The Da Vinci Code," "Angels and Demons") but never this effectively and formidably. (*The film is rated "R" and runs 123 min.*)

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