Traffic

Remember you heard it here: *Traffic* is a movie that could be a major award winner this year. Directed by the ever-versatile Stephen Soderbergh, it is a multi-facted, high-energy drama, tightly interlacing several stories linked by drug trafficking.

One thread follows an honest Tijuana policeman (Benicio del Toro) struggling to stay straight in the midst of venality and corruption, a second exposes a former judge and newly-named national drug czar (Michael Douglas) both to the profundity of the drug problem and to the grim reality of his own teen daughter's (Erika Christiansen) drug habit, while a third finds two DEA agents (Don Cheadle and Luiz Guzman) in San Diego on the trail of a high-toned drug pusher and his ambitious wife (Steven Bauer and Catherine Zeta-Jones).

The multiple, complex story lines are done with seamless, riveting interconnections, aided by strong, distinctive performances from the leads and many fine featured players as well as by color-coding: hot amber for the Mexican sequences, a cool blue for the judge's story, and sunny, full color for the San Diego segment. The outcomes of these stories are hardly uniformly positive, appropriate to the tenaciousness of the problems they depict, but there are wisps of hope, too.

Soderbergh is a director loathe to repeat himself. In just under two years, besides *Traffic*, he has made films as diverse as *Out of Sight*, *The Limey*, and *Erin Brockovich*. In making *Traffic*, he has borrowed the concept and elements of the plot from a splendid 1990 British mini-series of the same name ("Traffik"(. But Soderbergh and his screenwriter, Stephen Gaghan, have made this multidimensional drama their own, and made it into an American story--and it is simply terrific.

("Traffic" is rated "R" for language, violence, and drug themes.)

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