Guy Ritchie’s ‘Snatch’ an enjoyable, kinetic caper flick

BY TIM O'COIN
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Two years ago, up-and-coming film director Guy Ritchie, already a hit in his native Britain, wowwed the American indie scene with his offbeat and lively caper film “Lock, Stock, and Two Smoking Barrels.” Film buffs far and wide sang the British wunderkind’s praises, ensuring that any future project the young filmmaker would be well received in the states, if only by die-hard movie aficionados.

“Snatch,” Ritchie’s long-awaited follow-up to his surprise indie hit of 1999, finally arrived in U.S. theaters a couple of weeks ago, not only in wider release than his previous film, but also with some more recognizable thespians — including Brad Pitt, Benicio del Toro, and Dennis Farina — among the movie’s ensemble cast. Nonetheless, “Snatch” maintains the spirit of an independent film, even if it possesses a bit more gloss than most. Indeed, Ritchie’s greatest offense may be a lack of originality in subject matter — like its predecessor, “Snatch” is a caper film dabbling in comedy and crime, set in the seedy underbelly of London. Some critics have derided Ritchie for this, though I think it’s a bit too early in this director’s career to label him a one-trick pony. Debates about originality aside, “Snatch” is a great fun — its kinetic pacing plays well with the film’s sharp humor and quirky characters. The almost over-the-top liveliness of the movie might put off some at first, but it does grow on you by the end.

Plot-wise, “Snatch” is very complex, but not needlessly so. Nor is the plot incomprehensible — it may not make much sense at first, but Ritchie (who also wrote the screenplay) effortlessly ties everything together. The film’s end. The movie engages the audience by virtue of its characters and humor so that plot questions rarely arise — we simply follow joyfully along as the film navigates its numerous twists and turns. Few filmmakers can make a plot as complex as “Snatch”’s work effectively, but Ritchie manages to do so in a splendid fashion — it takes a bit of effort to follow, but it all falls neatly into place.

Ritchie tosses so many twists into the story that it would take volumes to explain the plot on paper, though here’s an abbreviated version. A heist in Belgium, orchestrated by Frankie Four Fingers (Benicio del Toro), yields an 84-karat diamond. Frankie travels to London where he arranges to sell the stone to Cousin Avi (Dennis Farina), a gangster on the other side of the pond. Wind of Frankie’s valuable cargo reaches the ears of gun dealer Boris the Blade (Rade Serbedzija), who employs two hapless pawn shop owners (Robbie Gee and Lennie James) to retrieve Frankie of the diamond.

In a seemingly separate storyline, though Ritchie makes it evident that it will somehow be linked with the diamond chase, crooked boxing promoter Turkish (Jason Statham) and his assistant Tommy (Stephen Graham) run afoul of crime kingpin Brick Top (Alan Ford) when their fighter, a gypsy named Mickey (Brad Pitt), refuses to throw a fixed match. Even more characters make their way into the film later on, including tough for-hire Bullet Tooth Tony (Vinnie Jones), Avi’s cousin Doug the Head (Mike Reid), and a rather unusual dog.

Ritchie is a playful director, and the frantic pacing of this movie reflects his style. Fast cuts, multiple angles, and other camera tricks abound, giving the film a distinct kinetic liveliness, as do the rather cartoonish sound effects that accompany certain scenes.

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“Snatch,” instead of coming off as complete nonsense.

One can literally feel the enthusiasm of the cast as they bring to life the colorful characters that densely populate Ritchie’s script. No talent is wasted here — the performances are spot on and downright hilarious (or terrifying, as in the case of Brick Top). Ritchie’s skill in directing absurd situations and characters with a surprising and intelligent wit — rarely seen in comedies these days — pays off well in this movie. Such humor also populates the dialogue; nearly every line is delivered with perfect comic timing. Few directors these days seem to understand that the best comedy comes from the characters and the way they interact with certain situations, not simply the situations themselves. It’s refreshing to see a director who doesn’t rely solely on prat falls and sight gags, though Ritchie does make use of these in “Snatch.”

It’s worth noting that despite the broader range of talent in “Snatch,” namely the above-mentioned presence of American actors, it still remains very much a distinctly British production. Ritchie’s attention to detail ensures that American audiences, influenced by domestically-bred stereotypes, will experience a much steadier, more real version of London, different than the prudish preconceptions of England they are perhaps used to.

One certainly has to appreciate the absolute zest that Ritchie has toward his films, even if they are a different variation on the same subject. “Snatch” barrels forward at a lively breakneck speed, and while it may not be a very different ride, it sure is an enjoyable one.

Seven Days...

Friday, February 2nd
Charles Feelgood at Avalon, Boston
Rane at The Attic, Newton
Strangefolks at Somerville Theatre, Somerville
Point of Grace at Hynes Convention Center, Boston
Seks Bombs at Lizard Lounge, Cambridge
Dave Foley at Plough & Stars, Cambridge

Saturday, February 3rd
Entrain at Club 58, Quincy
Topaz at Middle East Club, Cambridge
Ben Harper and Jack Johnson at Brandeis University, Waltham
Les Sampou at A Joyful Noise, Lexington
The Persuasions at Sculler’s, Boston

Sunday, February 4th
Jill Scott at Avalon, Boston

Monday, February 5th
The Young Dubliners at House of Blues, Cambridge

Tuesday, February 6th
Howie Day at Becker College, Worcester
Howie Day at Assumption College, Worcester
Glen Phillips and John Mayer at House of Blues, Cambridge
Pierre Bensusan at Johnny D’s, Somerville

Thursday, February 8th
Lee Ann Womack and Alan Jackson at The Centrum, Worcester
Buddy Guy at The Roxey, Boston
Super Diamond and Seks Bombs at Axis, Boston
Frank Morey at Tix Na Nog, Somerville
Kevin Mahogany at Sculler’s, Boston

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Blue Highways: A Journey into America
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— Tim O’Coin ’02

MUSIC
Can’t Slow Down
Saves The Day

“Punk’s not dead, it’s just sleeping”

— Katie Kerigan ’03

WEB SITE
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— Alicia Starkey ’03