



Gangster an American epic

filmreview

American Gangster

Directed by Ridley Scott
Starring Denzel Washington, Russel Crowe,
Chiwetel Ejiofor, and Cuba Gooding Jr

MATTHEW HUBERT
Arts & Entertainment Writer

It may have taken a three years for him to land the script, but Ridley Scott was willing to wait for *American Gangster*, counting on his long and distinguished list of credits—*Blade Runner*, *Alien*, *Gladiator*—to bring the flick onto his docket. While the movie may have taken seven years to get made, it was time well spent for the seasoned director.

American Gangster is a blow-for-blow account of the true story of Frank Lucas (Denzel Washington), a self-made drug kingpin who rose to prominence in New York City in the early '70s. After the death of "Bumpy" Johnson, his mentor of nearly 15 years, Lucas retires from the chauffeur life and grabs a monopoly over the city's drug trade via "Blue Magic," cheap, pure heroin, brought in thanks to the Vietnam War.

On the other side of the law is Ridley Scott's reliable go-to-guy, Russell Crowe. He plays Richie Roberts, a New Jersey narcotics detective struggling to become a state prosecutor. With two outstanding actors at his disposal, Scott allows each character's story to unfold with a keen but surprisingly underwhelming eye. Frank's rise to power is the typical Tony Montana-esque tale of excess and lavishness, while Richie goes through all the familiar motions of being the only honest cop on the beat: estranged wife and son, night class, and a

partner who ends up corrupted.

All the other usual motifs are here too, and exceptionally performed: Gangster Number 1's eager but thick younger brother (Chiwetel Ejiofor), the failed musician turned hotshot club owner (Cuba Gooding Jr), the Italian mob boss (Armande Assante). The most surprising and altogether entertaining turn, however, is Josh Brolin's Detective Trupo, who steals nearly every scene as Richie's crooked NYC counterpart.

Despite excellent acting, the plot may seem cliché. But just when the audience is ready to hang it up and pass *American Gangster* off as just another telltale cop flick, Scott turns these presumptions upside down and shows the more complicated side of things.

Frank's sensible mind for his family and his position in the community has a dark counterpart in his brutality—the jar of sugar scene is a disturbing complication of his endearing, bad-guy nature. From then on, the film becomes less of a one-off narc film and more a portrait of the misgivings of the American dream. Scott chimes in on the ambiguous nature of honesty, corruption, greed, and justice to a startling effect. It's a stirring commentary on principles that resound in today's America: the endless red tape and bureaucratic turmoil where Richie has to stand his ground doesn't seem to have changed in 30 years.

To the dismay of all those moviegoers who are looking for the familiar brand of gangster flick, *American Gangster* is anything but. Scott manages to weave a blistering critique of Americana without beating the audience over the head; to do this and still keep it entertaining is to do so carefully. That Richie and Frank never cross paths until the film's end is an ironic twist on the saying that good things come to those who wait—one that will surely echo at Oscar time.

WGA Strike showing execs who really makes the money



ELIZABETH
VAIL

A&E Commentary

Dear Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers: you're fucked. Because of you, movie production has slowed to a stop, the 2007/08 television season has been crippled, and thousands of film industry professionals have been laid off. Money and time you can't afford to lose are being wasted in incredible amounts, all thanks to you.

And why? The Writer's Guild of America strike. You forgot that screenwriters are people with brains, talent, and financial responsibilities. You figured once you paid writers for penning your television episodes and film scripts, they'd wander back to their little cages where they'd be content to live on Chinese food, pencil shavings, and the clicking of their laptop keys.

Writers are artists, aren't they? They don't care about the money! They won't notice if you put the results of their late nights of creative frustration up on the Internet for free, reap the ad revenue, and "forget" to compensate them. Bet you thought you were smart when you labelled those full-length episode downloads "promotions"—those pesky screenwriters wouldn't know the difference.

Guess what? They did, and suddenly, you have no *Heroes* season finale. No script for the *Prince of Persia* movie. Your stance sure changed quickly, didn't it? "Those ungrateful, greedy writers!" you exclaimed to the public. "Those pampered, pen-pushing snobs are willing to ruin movies and TV for everyone just to get more money! The average screenwriter already makes \$200 000 per year!" Of course, you didn't mention how that's what the average *consistently working* screenwriter makes—and they're the minority.

You were right the first time: writers don't

care about the money. They care about fair compensation. When a publisher distributes a novel, the author gets royalties. When that novel's published as an e-book, the author *still* gets royalties. When you air a sitcom on television, the writers get paid. So when you post those episodes on the Internet, you don't have the right to withhold paying the writers for the work they did under the lame excuse that "the Internets" are still too much of a new-fangled *Jetsons*-on-acid technology to tell if it will be profitable.

The one good thing to come out of your transparent grasping is this: you're discovering just how much writers are worth. *The Office* is one of the most popular comedies on television, but it can't make people laugh if no one writes any jokes. In fact, the unused scripts that were handed in before the strike deadline won't be performed because—surprise!—a third of *The Office*'s cast also writes the show as WGA members.

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The casts of *Grey's Anatomy* and *24* performed similar walk-outs. Fans of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, shows that perform scripts written the same day, have already noticed their absence. Congratulations: there are five television phenomena that won't make it to February sweeps.

You treated writers like personal assistants, thinking that if you mistreat them enough, they'll meekly perform your most important tasks. You forgot that writers are an essential leg of the industry chair—right up there with producers, directors, and actors—and it's been that way for decades. If you let the strike go on much longer, you won't need a writer to pen the ending. And it won't be a happy one.



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