

*Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels***A banal celebration of ruthlessness****Robert Stevens****11 September 1998**

Written and Directed by Guy Ritchie
Starring Nick Moran, P.H. Moriarty, Lenny McLean,
Frank Harper, Vinnie Jones and Sting

Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels is a black comedy and the directorial debut of Guy Ritchie who also wrote the screenplay. The film has been hailed as a virtual masterpiece by a gushing media in Britain. The *Guardian* named it "film of the week" and the natural successor to the 1971 film, *Get Carter*, which starred Michael Caine, while the *Daily Telegraph* labelled it a "blistering, hugely confident debut picture".

Commercial considerations have played no small role in the slavish reviews that have welcomed a product promoted as the next great milestone in the "renaissance" of the British film industry. One reviewer astutely observed that the industry couldn't afford for *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* to fail, as it had been more than a year since *The Full Monty* was released and another hit movie was needed.

The film's plot revolves around the everyday lives of gangsters in London's red-light area, Soho. A member of one gang, Eddy (Nick Moran), is supposedly a sharp card player. The gang raises the requisite \$100,000 to secure Eddy a place at a high-stake card table organised by feared local gangster and porn dealer, "Hatchet" Harry, played by P.H. Moriarty.

Unbeknownst to Eddy and company, the card game is rigged and he ends up losing \$500,000. The gang are then warned by Harry's henchman, Barry the Baptist, so called because he puts his victim's heads in a bucket of water, that the money is to be paid back within one week or they will have their fingers cut off and worse. As they ponder ways of getting the money back, Eddy's gang become embroiled in the activities of other gangs and individuals--upper class marijuana growers and

suppliers, Samoan drug dealers, two Liverpudlian wide-boys, a middle man named Nick the Greek, a debt collector and his clone-like son.

Ritchie makes great efforts to accurately portray the milieu, mentality and social outlook of those his film depicts. The card game sequence is shot in the ring of the infamous Repton Boxing Gym, a place frequented by the notorious gangland killers, Ronnie and Reggie Kray. One section of the film's dialogue consists almost entirely of Cockney rhyming slang, which is subtitled for the benefit of those who are "not in the know".

In this context, media discussion of the film's merits has centred on Ritchie's casting of real life "hard men" as his gangsters. *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* is dedicated to the recently deceased Lenny McLean, who plays Barry the Baptist. A world heavyweight bare-knuckle champion fighter, McLean had close ties to organised crime and was a personal friend of the Krays. In 1992 he was tried for a murder at a night club where he worked as a doorman, but was convicted of the lesser charge of grievous bodily harm and served an 18-month prison sentence. Vinnie Jones, who plays the "muscle" working for Hatchet Harry, is a professional soccer player with a reputation for his sometimes brutal behaviour on the field and off. He was recently found guilty in court of assaulting one of his neighbours.

Ritchie's casting policy has been almost universally applauded for supposedly lending the film an authenticity that could not have been achieved using regular actors. This reached ludicrous levels when Ritchie appeared on BBC television's flagship news programme, *Newsnight*, and was asked to comment on why it is that American actors could play gangsters and hoodlums better than British actors. A strange assertion, given that British actors are chosen to play the villain in Hollywood blockbusters with monotonous

regularity.

This focus on Ritchie's choice of actors is only one expression of a broader fascination with the gangster culture which *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* not merely depicts, but rather glorifies. The film taps into an already existing cinematic genre that is infatuated with the lives of small-time crooks. Almost inevitably it has been labelled as Tarantinoesque. The violence portrayed in the film is excessive, as has become the norm, and is either preceded or followed by an attempt at "black humour" so we all know that this is really only good fun.

Despite its pretensions to depict the life of the outsider living on the fringes of society, this film is a shallow glorification of the status quo. One is asked yet again to identify with characters that have lost any sense of humanity and to celebrate in the ruthless pursuit of money and power. The only requirement asked of the audience is to root for the victory of one gang over another, as if this were just a children's game of cowboys and Indians.

There is something very retrogressive about yet another eulogy to the accumulation of wealth by the powerful at the expense of the weak. It is by no means illegitimate to produce cinema that addresses such issues as organised crime. Many popular and worthwhile films from *White Heat* to the *Godfather* trilogy have done so. But the best of these have at least sought to examine the social and psychological issues that arise when probing the lives of such alienated people and in this way illuminate broader themes relating to present-day society. *The Krays*, the 1990 film directed by Peter Medak, for example explored similar turf to *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*. It was in no way a great film, but it at least tried to address the background of its subjects and how they came to be what they were.

There is really nothing of this in the approach of Ritchie. *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* substitutes real life locations for a plot and real life "hard men" for character development. Despite the various twists and turns, you can invariably guess what is going to happen next and what the response of any given character will be.

With the possible exception of Eddy, the film is populated by a collection of stereotypes and tedious caricatures. The incompetent antics of the Liverpudlian

characters who quickly find themselves out of their depth in London's "mean streets" began to irritate me within a few minutes of their appearance.

For a number of years, various mediocre films have been promoted as the latest landmark in the renaissance of British cinema--the next *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, the next *Trainspotting*, the next *Full Monty*, etc. The phrase, "One Swallow doth not a summer make" springs to mind here. How many more times are we going to be informed that a new British director has directed another "great" film, only to find that the same old story has simply been repackaged?



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