Before the Devil Knows You're Dead: What are the dark forces at work?

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Directed by Sidney Lumet, screenplay by Kelly Masterson

A new film by veteran American filmmaker Sidney Lumet, now 83, is something of an event. Lumet's lengthy film career began half a century ago with the much-acclaimed *12 Angry Men* (1957). The following decade saw him direct a number of notable films, including *Long Day's Journey Into Night* in 1962 and *The Pawnbroker* and *Fail-Safe* in 1964. *Serpico*, *Dog Day Afternoon* and *Network* were prominent films of the 1970s (perhaps Lumet's most productive decade), the last earning 10 Academy Award Nominations and winning in four categories.

Lumet continued tackling significant issues in the 1980s—police corruption in *Prince of the City* (1981), the legal system in *The Verdict* (1982), the Rosenberg case in *Daniel* (1983) and left-wing terrorists gone underground in *Running on Empty* (1988). One could have been forgiven, however, by the early or mid-1990s for thinking that Lumet's most memorable work lay behind him.

At their best, Lumet's films are intelligent, well made and endowed with a social conscience. The corruption of various institutions and its consequences for ordinary, fallible people and for the moral state of the society as a whole have been important themes in his work. Although rarely inspired, his films are nonetheless affecting. Lumet is recognized for his ability to draw out strong performances from his actors, and he has undoubtedly worked with many of the most remarkable performers of the past 50 years.

His 45th and most recent film, *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead*, has been widely proclaimed as a return to form. The film takes its title from an old Irish toast, "May you be in heaven half an hour before the devil knows you're dead," an ominous expression that seems to portend catastrophe.

Indeed, the *Devil*'s Hanson brothers face a challenge from dark forces, within and without. Andy (Philip Seymour Hoffman), the older of the two, devises a plan to make some quick money, robbing their parents' jewelry store. He coerces his younger sibling, Hank (Ethan Hawke), into joining him. Andy is a desperate character, financially and emotionally. He deludes himself about the supposed ease of the operation; at the same time, he clearly has a score to settle with his parents.

Andy is in a panic because he is stealing from his company, where he is a payroll executive, to pay for an overextended lifestyle that includes a dependency on heroin. Comfort comes to him in the form of injections in posh surroundings. To his silk-clad pusher, he confesses that "My life doesn't add up. I'm not the sum of my parts. All my parts don't add up to one me."

Despite the trappings of success, Andy's life is falling apart and his coping mechanisms are increasingly ineffective. He and his restless wife Gina (Marisa Tomei) go to Rio just to feel human.

Brother Hank, considered a loser, is hanging on by his fingernails. His preferred method of dulling his brain is spending time in a bar wallowing in self-pity. Hank's two major woes are being seriously behind in child support payment and too broke to run away with Gina, whom he sees clandestinely.

On the other hand, the brothers' parents (Albert Finney and Rosemary Harris) are happily married and well-off as proprietors of a jewelry story in a suburban strip mall. "It's a victimless crime, if your [expletive] little conscience bothers you," says Andy as he bullies Hank into agreeing to the robbery.

In out-of sequence slices of drama, the film's events unfold from a variety of angles and character perspectives. The non-chronological approach also provides for a more objective look at the characters and effectively ratchets up the movie's tension and urgency.

One's hopes are raised in the opening sequences of *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead* The major characters seem recognizable and authentic human types. Andy, Hank and Gina are cracking at the seams. They want to be successful, they want to have loving relationships. They want their birthright as members of the middle class in America. In Manhattan, where money apparently grows on trees, the pressure upon them is almost unbearable. Sixty thousand dollars is all they'll need, says Andy, to get themselves out of the hole, a hole that threatens to become his grave.

As the impact of the botched burglary widens calamitously, Andy spins out of control, Hank is less able to extricate himself from a fetal position, while Gina feels more and more like a nobody**.** Having always thought of herself as the sum of her parts, her physical parts, Gina's internal blankness takes over. She adds up as a person even less than Andy and Hank. In the current social scheme of things, all three are small people getting smaller by the minute. So far, the film is on track.

Even the robbery has a logic: the parents' losses will be made up by their insurance. And there is also the added psychological bonus of exorcising resentment felt toward a father for past mistreatment.

Unfortunately, however, what begins as a white-knuckle melodrama driven by social impulses degenerates into the unconvincing self-immolation of a family rooted apparently in the

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filthiness of humankind.

How does the film fall so completely apart in its second half? Why is Lumet unable to sustain the film's initial premise—that it is society that is crushing his characters, that they are living an American tragedy, rather than biblical bad seeds? Not even the actors can figure it out, and at a certain point they start thrashing about trying to impart sense to the mayhem.

The film is a critics' favorite, receiving glowing reviews in most quarters, and not for its strengths. Case in point is the piece by the *New York Times*'s A. O. Scott, who highlights the words of the film's elderly jewelry dealer: "The world is an evil place. Some people make money from it, some people are destroyed by it." Scott agrees and writes that "The evil in this world arises not out of any grand metaphysical principle, but rather from petty, permanent features of the human character: greed, envy, stupidity, vanity."

At the end of his article, Scott tries to soften the point: "My grandfather, whose background was not so different from Mr. Lumet's, was dismissive of movies that seemed overly dark or despairing. 'There wasn't a single decent human being in the whole movie,' he used to complain. He might not have found any in *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead*, but he would also have recognized the humanism that saves this harsh tale from nihilism. The screen may be full of losers, liars, killer and thieves, but behind the camera is a mensch."

In fact, the film's humanism is destroyed by its end, and the figure behind the camera has become discouraged and demoralized.

In a more critical comment on the film (and also the Coen brothers' *No Country for Old Men*), Andrew Sarris writes: "Two of the darkest death-driven films of the 45th New York Film Festival are both American works directed by filmmakers who, though no strangers to noirish projects in the past, have attained new heights, or is it depths, of malignancy and morbidity, which, I suppose, is fitting for the increasingly dismal and depressing times in which we live."

Why in the twilight of his career has Lumet sunk to new depths of malignancy and morbidity? One would have to look first and foremost to the difficulties of the last half-century or more. Lumet was around the Communist Party youth movement as an adolescent. His evolution is hardly unique within his generation or even younger ones. Having understood so little about the tragedies of the twentieth century, how prepared are many established filmmakers for the twenty-first? "Disappointed" by society and humanity, they turn with varying degrees of bitterness on their fellow creatures.

Some insight into Lumet's specific evolution may be provided by Sarris in his *The American Cinema* (1968), in which he wrote: "At its best, Lumet's direction is efficiently vehicular but pleasantly impersonal.... When his subjects are responsible, as in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, his services are valuable. In most other instances, only his innate good taste saves him from utter mediocrity.... Lumet shows no sign of ever rising above the middle-brow aspirations of his projects to become the master rather than the mimic of the current trend away from Hollywood."

A mimic rather than a master, that remains largely the case. Even in his current "malignancy and morbidity," Lumet is hardly a pioneer.

And what of the origins of the filmmaker's middle-brow aspirations? (Or perhaps limitations—it is Sarris's weakness to suppose that the director *chose* his constraints.) That is a complicated issue tied to the era in which Lumet matured artistically. Lumet's star rose when he became an important television director in the 1950s, during the medium's "Golden Age." In an essay written about that period, Anna Everett comments that "it is important to note that the 'golden age' did coincide with the cold-war era and McCarthyism and that cold-war references, such as avoiding communism and loving America, were frequently incorporated in the teleplays of the mid to late 1950s."

In an obituary of Lumet's contemporary, John Frankenheimer, the WSWS stated the "any medium which emerged as the profit-driven property of large American corporations and under the close scrutiny of the US authorities in the midst of the Cold War, with its anticommunism, conformism and generally stagnant intellectual climate, would inevitably be deformed by those processes." There were questions and themes and artistic approaches that the best American film and television directors simply could not take up. The artist pays a price for that kind of overall stagnation, even if one is among those who are more critical and aware.

As with Frankenheimer, Lumet's attempt to reconcile social reformism and humanism with a fundamental acceptance of "American democracy" and the profit system—the project of postwar liberalism—inevitably failed. Neither director ever rejected the straitjacket of liberal anticommunism with its overall acceptance of the status quo, nor "the pragmatic and eclectic aesthetics that generally accompanied such positions."

Lumet admitted his own limitations in a 1982 interview when he was asked about his favorites movies. "*Greed*, he says slowly, *Intolerance*, *Potemkin*. Warming up to the task, he names *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, *The Bicycle Thief*, *The Seventh Seal*, film school classics all. A crowd of cast and crew members gathers, curious to hear his litany. *Casablanca*, he continues, *Stagecoach*, *The Godfather*, parts one and two, *Amarcord*.

"He could go on, but someone interrupts—no Sidney Lumet movies? 'No, he says placidly, 'None are good enough.' "

The comment is a bit sad, but, sadly, true.

Before the Devil Knows You're Dead is a movie dismayed by the state of the world. It seems beyond the grasp of its director to take a closer look at the problem and not settle for easy, fashionable answers. This compromised whatever was at once promising and valuable in the film.

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