



Fact Sheet

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Media Studies

Film Review: Kiss Kiss, Bang Bang

Movies that set out to milk comedy from violence do so at their peril. By “violence” in this case I don’t mean the kind of Keystone Kops knockabout routines or the Three Stooges head-bopping and eye poking or Abbot and Costello being terrorised by hoodlums or ghouls. In contemporary black comedies “violence” has come to mean witnessing a man’s head being shot off and being expected to laugh at this because the shooting was accidental. Remember the stomach-turning scene from “Pulp Fiction” which resulted in the interior of a car being covered in gore? Well today’s movie, “Kiss Kiss, Bang Bang” boasts a rather similar sequence and it’s just as horrifically unfunny as its predecessor in “Pulp Fiction”.

However, if you enjoyed “Pulp Fiction” or its sort-of sequel “Get Shorty” then you just might enjoy “Kiss Kiss, Bang Bang”. This is by no means to be taken as a recommendation that you should go and pay good money to see “Kiss Kiss, Bang Bang”. You could almost stick a random pin in the movie guides and come up with something better.

It’s a shame, and I tried hard to enjoy it because it does have touches of style – like the moment when the film screeches to a halt halfway between frames while the narrator explains that we’re getting too far ahead of ourselves with the plot, or the use of Raymond Chandler detective story book titles to create chapter headings throughout the movie and, indeed, Robert Downey Junior’s engaging performance as the petty thief from New York who finds himself in, way over his head, in corrupt and murderous Hollywood. But, disappointingly, there’s not enough substance to support the style and the movie gets more and more bogged down in an irritatingly incomprehensible plot and increasing instances of gratuitous violence.

The writer/director of “Kiss Kiss, Bang Bang” is Shane Black who was the originating writer for the “Lethal Weapon” series, as well as “The Last Boy Scout” and “The Long Kiss Goodnight”. All of these movies had an undeniably violent streak but they also had a degree of cinematic integrity – you can call it classic plot progression if you wish – which draws you in as a viewer and takes you along for the ride. Put simply, they were all grounded in good stories whereas “Kiss Kiss, Bang Bang” is not. It’s just plain silly. I came away with the impression that the movie had been aimed to appeal to the undemanding mid-teenage audience. Hence the attitude: “forget the plot – just throw in some more mindless violence.”

Shane Black has reportedly intended to set out to re-interpret the Film Noir but, with “Kiss Kiss, Bang Bang”, has failed miserably. Black has been quoted as saying that: “there have been very few contemporary interpretations of the great LA private eye tradition”. One can only assume that movies such as “Chinatown” and “Devil in a Blue Dress” slipped under Shane Black’s radar.

The use of Raymond Chandler's book titles as chapter headings in "Kiss Kiss, Bang Bang" is perhaps meant to be a tribute to Chandler but, in the context of this movie, it is more of an insult. In fact, if Chandler's hard-bitten private eye Philip Marlowe was ever to meet up with Shane Black somewhere in movieland he'd probably want to take a swing at him.

Now, on a happier note, I'd like to pay tribute to a grand old lady of the movies who has just celebrated a significant birthday. Yesterday, November 24, the Marryatville picture theatre in Adelaide which is now known as The Chelsea, passed a milestone eighty years of operation. The theatre opened on Tuesday night, November 24, 1925 as the Princess Theatre and is still, happily, going strong.

Typically of the manner in which movies were presented in the 1920's the theatre's opening night featured live performers as well as a movie. After an overture by the theatre's own orchestra - the Princess Orchestra - the fifteen hundred people in the audience were regaled by Miss Elsa Lewis - described as "the gipsy whistling violinist". The program for the evening said she was to perform "a repertoire of bewitching harmony".

The movie for the evening featured Mary Pickford - described in the program as "the world's sweetheart" - in the tear-jerking melodrama "Little Annie Rooney". This was a silent movie, of course, hence the need for the theatre orchestra to provide accompaniment.

In 1941 the theatre changed hands and was extensively renovated in the Art Deco style, by and large taking the form it retains to this day. Its name was changed to the Marryatville Ozone and it kept this name after being sold to Hoyts in 1951. Hoyts undertook the next major change to the theatre, widening the proscenium in 1955 to accommodate the cinemascope screen. In 1964 the theatre was sold to the Burnside Council who leased it to Wallis Theatres in 1971 who undertook additional renovations and re-named the theatre The Chelsea.

I began to build up my own fond memories of the Marryatville picture theatre around the mid-fifties. The introduction of television to Adelaide was still some way off and people still went to "the pictures" or "the films" as their major form of entertainment as well as their major source of visual news reports. Most theatre programs featured what was called a "newsreel" which was the fore-runner of today's television news. The "newsreel" was changed each week. In those days people attended the movies so regularly that it was not uncommon for some people to have permanent seat bookings for certain nights of the week - usually Friday or Saturday. Going to the movies was a social occasion.

I can remember warm summer nights at the Marryatville before it was air-conditioned and the staff would open up the big shutters down each side of the theatre to allow the breezes from the foothills to sweep through. It was almost like being at a drive-in.

I saw some great movies there in those years: "Carmen Jones", "Calamity Jane", "West Side Story" - How come it's the musicals I remember best? The stand-out was "High Society" - I can remember details of the night I first saw it and it remains my favourite musical.

The Chelsea survived – by the skin of its teeth – the picture theatre closures which followed the introduction of television in 1959 and it has remained one of my favourite screening venues. Third row back in the centre of the lounge puts you about dead level with the centre of the screen. You can't get much better than that.

Old picture theatres are filled with the ghosts of the stars who flickered across their screens and the memories of the people who came there to be carried off by the magic of the movies.

Let's hope the Chelsea continues to be a part of this process of wonderment and delight for another eighty years.

Happy eightieth birthday to The Chelsea...and happy Christmas to all of you listening.

John McGowan
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