

later. Perkins had a spectacular talent for edginess and anxiety, but Welles guided him in the opposite direction, giving K. ever more bravado and cockiness as his ordeal unfolds, further underscoring the guilt he is forever trying to mask; many reviewers criticized Perkins for this strategy, but Welles insisted that the blame or credit was due to himself alone. The supporting cast is a Europudding assortment befitting Welles's international tastes and the French-Italian-West German provenance of this picture. France makes a strong showing via Madeleine Robinson as K.'s landlady, Jeanne Moreau as his sultry neighbor, Suzanne Flon as a disabled woman who briefly crosses his path, and Michael Lonsdale as a priest; Austria's gifted Romy Schneider plays Hastler's mistress; Italy contributes Elsa Martinelli; and the Georgian-born Akim Tamiroff, one of Welles's perennial favorites, stands out as one of Hastler's craven clients.

With his deep background in radio and theater, Welles had the necessary skills for orchestrating these varied presences into a cohesive ensemble, and he mostly succeeded. I say "mostly" because he took a bit too much advantage of the European penchant for postsynchronized speech, substituting his own voice for those of about twelve characters here and there, including several lines of K.'s dialogue; he claimed this was for economic reasons, according to McBride, but injecting his own line readings was a temptation he constantly indulged in his films, and here it's pushed so far that you occasionally hear a voice when the character's mouth is closed. Still and all, while I've long regarded this film's soundtrack as its weakest aspect, on the Criterion disc it comes vividly across.

Cinema hasn't produced many notable Kafka adaptations; among the few are Raúl Ruiz's *The Penal Colony* (1970), Michael Haneke's *The Castle* (1997), and Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet's *Class Relations* (1984), based on the novel *Amerika*. There's also a 1993 adaptation of *The Trial*, starring Kyle MacLachlan, scripted by Harold Pinter, and directed by David Jones in a self-consciously realistic style that never generates much momentum even though such luminaries as Anthony Hopkins and Jason Robards are in the cast. Welles's film towers above these, but its reputation has not always been secure; in the Criterion program essay, Jonathan Lethem recalls that François Truffaut called it a misstep and various Welles aficionados (Peter Bogdanovich, James Naremore) have expressed serious reservations about it. Welles himself thought it was terrific, calling it "the best film I ever made," although after 1965 he sometimes put *Chimes at Midnight* atop his pantheon.

The Trial has had a shadowy little nook in my heart since I discovered it in 1963, and the new Criterion edition has made me love it all the more. The disc's longest extra

is *Filming "The Trial,"* which Welles intended as part of a series of documentaries about his pictures, although only a couple were completed; it's a talky and bare-bones affair, but it contains intriguing anecdotes and recollections. The interview with cinematographer Richard is also enlightening—Welles had difficulty remembering his lines!—and McBride's commentary is informative and engaging. *The Trial* is one of the exceedingly rare pictures that Welles made without interference or second-guessing by studios or producers, and it manifests his gifts in their purest, most uninhibited form. Lethem notes that Bogdanovich frowned on it at first but liked it more on a second viewing. Welles's immediate response: "See it a third time!" That's excellent advice, and repeat viewings will be more pleasurable than ever in Criterion's shimmering new edition.

—David Sterritt

One False Move

Produced by Jesse Beaton and Ben Myron; directed by Carl Franklin; screenplay by Billy Bob Thornton and Tom Epperson; cinematography by James L. Carter; edited by Carole Kravetz; production design by Gary T. New; costume design by Ron Leamon; music by Peter Haycock and Derek Holt, with orchestral underscore by Terry Plumeri; starring Bill Paxton, Cynda Williams, Billy Bob Thornton, Michael Beach, Jim Metzler, Earl Billings, and Natalie Canerday. 4K UHD + Blu Ray, color, 105 min., 1992. A Criterion Collection Release, www.criterion.com.

One False Move is a deeply affecting, perceptive, character-driven drama in the guise of a crime thriller. Impeccably structured and superbly paced, it was the first feature film of note by actor turned director Carl Franklin. (As did future New Hollywood legends in the 1960s, he first cut his teeth cranking out a trio of bargain-basement microbudget cheapies for Roger Corman.) It was also the first produced screenplay by (then little-known) Billy



Small-town sheriff Dale "Hurricane" Dixon (Bill Paxton) in *One False Move*.

Bob Thornton and his childhood friend Tom Epperson. Franklin would go on to direct (and write the screenplay for) the highly regarded adaptation of Walter Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1995), among other well-received films, before turning increasingly to high-end television productions; Epperson and Thornton would collaborate on five more screenplays, including, most notably, *Jayne Mansfield's Car* (2012). And many of the on-screen performers, including Bill Paxton and Thornton himself (Sheriff Dale "Hurricane" Dixon and murderous, drug-addled Ray Malcolm, respectively) would go on to prolific and celebrated careers. Nevertheless, regarding all hands on this production, as Woody Allen said of Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity*, *One False Move* is not only their best film, it is "pretty much anybody's best film."

Now available in a long-overdue director-approved 4K digital restoration from The Criterion Collection (a two-disc set with both UHD and Blu-Ray editions), *One False Move* begins with eight very discomfiting minutes of squirm-inducing violence. Franklin, himself taken aback at what he had shot, even debated toning it down after viewing the rushes. Indeed, subsequently, an advance screening for friends was quickly unsettled by a parade of walkouts, even though, as the director observes, the audience sees neither blood nor entry wounds in those initial harrowing scenes. Rather, it was the effectiveness with which the film reflected the humanity of those victims (as opposed to presenting them as cookie-cutter caricatures or barely-there cannon fodder), which made the episodes all the more realistic, relatable—and terrifying.

In the wake of that cold-blooded killing spree, three outlaws, now heavy with stolen cash and a mountain of coke, are on the run. Pluto (Michael Beach, who gives, throughout, a performance of such icy perfection that it can be too easily taken for granted), Ray (Thornton), and Fantasia (Cynda Williams, fresh from her debut in Spike Lee's *Mo' Better Blues*), make for what at first seems an unlikely trio: the cerebral, thinking-three-steps-ahead ringleader, his impulsive ex-prison buddy accomplice, and (to Pluto's obvious disgust), Ray's lover, the how-did-she-ever-get-mixed-in with this crowd Fantasia, whose obvious (if at crucial moments on the ropes) humanity contrasts markedly with her psychopathic affiliates.

As the Los Angeles police deduce from a crime scene clue, the three are likely headed for an obscure hamlet in rural Arkansas, to which some in the small gang apparently have ties. And so in a tightly constructed, and, in retrospect, relatively spare sequence of movements, several stories converge. The first is a variation on the traditional culture clash, as two seen-it-all homicide detectives from the big city, Cole and McFeely (Jim Metzler and Earl Billings) fly to sleepy, small-town Arkansas in anticipation of lying

in wait for the killers. There they coordinate with and spend some time getting to know local lawman Dale "Hurricane" Dixon.

Dixon, who never had the need (nor the inclination) to draw his weapon in exercising authority and effectively defusing local disputes, is now well out of his depth. Nevertheless, he sports a starstruck enthusiasm about getting in on a capital case with much more gravitas than the domestic disputes, barroom brawls, and bootleg whiskey busts that are his stock in trade. His naiveté is smartly contrasted by the wary disposition of his well-grounded wife (Natalie Canerday), who pointedly observes to their out of town guests that while Dale watches TV, she "reads nonfiction." The Dixons also have a young daughter, one of three children who play small but pivotal roles in clarifying the stakes at distinct points in the narrative.

The second story, also generically familiar if so flawlessly executed that it is alive with the thrill of seeing something new, is that of the killers on the run—in this instance lingering on the tensions between each member of the trio in every combination, and the challenges they face driving through Texas. Some of those obstacles are requisite, such as a rendezvous gone wrong where they had hoped to unload their loot; others are wildly unexpected, and in all cases they are cinematically executed with uncommon élan. And, finally, a third narrative emerges, slowly as the backstories of several of these characters are revealed; and they turn out to be the real story, and the only one that matters, and it takes *One False Move* to a rarefied level. As Janet Maslin observed in her 1992 review for *The New York Times*, heralding the arrival of "a director who knows the effects he wants and knows precisely how to achieve them," that despite working within "the idiom of a conventional crime story... Mr. Franklin delivers the kind of symmetry, surprise and detail that easily transcend the limits of the genre."

Any discussion of *One False Move* must engage the question of violence on the screen—and its responsible portrayal. As noted, the opening scenes of this film are hard to sit through. Yet even there, the horror portrayed has distinct dramatic purpose, and, ultimately, is not gratuitous; certainly, it lacks the leering, pornographic blood lust of other films from that period, such as *Total Recall* (1990) and *Reservoir Dogs* (1992). In fact, for the rest of the movie, there are only three episodes of violence, one remarkably restrained (and shot from a distance), though a final confrontation is admittedly somewhat more intense. But those early scenes establish, chillingly, what Pluto and Ray are capable of, and suddenly, and that knowledge fills even the most casual moments that follow with a thick tension and anticipation of the possible. Notably, Franklin also clearly respects the victims of the violence on screen, often purposefully pausing for moments of quiet after such outbursts, which provide what he calls "a moment of silence to observe



Violent criminal Ray Malcolm (Billy Bob Thornton) and girlfriend Lila "Fantasia" Walker are on the lam in Carl Franklin's *One False Move*.

the passing of human life"—a notion utterly alien to the two films mentioned above.

Looking past the bloodshed and considering instead the approximately ninety-plus minutes of this 105-minute picture, what remains is a film with something to say. *One False Move* is imbued with a remarkable sensitivity to that difficult, inescapable, and here distinctly American question of race. All three sides of the movie's converging triangles are mixed-race affairs: the three fugitives, the two LA cops, and the very setting of "Star City" Arkansas, where Dixon patrols a town with very clear (if often transgressed) color lines. Without stopping to lecture, *One False Move* has more compelling things to say about race relations in America than most civic-minded documentaries or well-intentioned message movies. It offers no easy answers, but Franklin offers a hint of hope in the film's final passage.

Enmeshed with race are interrogations of gender. A movie called "one false move" is filled with numerous such missteps, impulsive turning points, which shape the trajectory of the characters' possibilities and fates. Fantasia, most notably, makes two crucial "false" moves. One, early on, is understandable; the other, midway through, and the hinge point of the narrative, on an arid stretch of a Texas highway, is heartbreakingly irreversible. (More generally, as Franklin notes, her character, who on the surface is the most passive of the principal players, repeatedly makes the choices that determine the course of the unfolding story.) It turns out that Dixon has a false move in his past as well, and it is the legacy of those false moves by Fantasia and Dixon that take control of the story, shedding the standard concerns of what had been the nominal plot.

Following a gentle homage to *North by Northwest* (1959), as *One False Move* then hurtles toward its (inevitable?) climax, Franklin's camera (and the very effective score, courtesy of Peter Haycock, Derek Holt, and a blistering harmonica player who elbowed his way onto the production),

becomes increasingly restless and expressionistic. A momentum-building cross-cutting between each of the players, designed to evoke the finale of *High Noon* (1952), is most powerful when it lingers on those characters going about their business unaware of the events about to transpire. Here, as throughout, the smallest of details—set decoration, camera placement, frame composition (all seen, for example, in a late visit to Fantasia's childhood home)—mark the historical legacies that usher the protagonists toward their destinies.

Carl Franklin's film might easily have passed unnoticed. Modestly budgeted, and produced by IRS media (a subsidiary of IRS records that operated at the fringes of the film industry, primarily as a straight-to-video company), *One False Move* was completed in the spring of 1991 and then left untouched on the shelf for almost a full year. Ultimately, promotional screenings on the festival circuit garnered rapturous word of mouth, which led in turn to a limited art-house release in Seattle, Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York the following May. Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert were among the many critics in those cities who championed the movie; Siskel lauded "a brilliant detective thriller that...demands to be seen right away"; he would ultimately rate it as the best film of 1992. Score one for the critics: *One False Move*, originally destined to languish in the back rows and bargain-bins of local video stores, instead found theatrical distribution, and emerged, and endures, as one of the great films of the 1990s.

Criterion's restoration is characteristically excellent, and in this case especially welcome, as subtle choices about color schemes (and ambient sounds) are no small part of this film's virtuosity. Extras accompanying the set include an uncommonly thoughtful and informative commentary by Franklin recorded in 1999, a new half-hour conversation between Franklin and Billy Bob Thornton, and an essay by crime novelist William Boyle.—Jonathan Kirshner

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