

# Day of reckoning

by [John Petrakis](#) in the [May 8, 2002](#) issue

A tale of redemption" is a phrase that film critics like to toss around. It usually makes some sense, since most dramas have at least one character who realizes the error of his or her ways and tries to do something about it before the curtain falls--a sort of low-rent form of redemption.

High-end redemption is harder to come by in contemporary American cinema. (It used to be a real crowd-pleaser, back in the silent days of D. W. Griffith [*Intolerance*] and Erich von Stroheim [*Greed*], and in the populist tales of Frank Capra and Preston Sturges. After that, the theme was mostly left to foreign directors such as Ingmar Bergman and Krzysztof Kieslowski.) But Roger Michell's *Changing Lanes* is a big-budget movie about redemption, and it treats the theme with surprising grace and intelligence.

The story, which plays out on a wet and gloomy Good Friday in Manhattan, concerns the moral travails of two men who would appear to have little in common: Gavin Banek (Ben Affleck), a rich young Wall Street attorney who is at the center of a shady attempt to fleece a wealthy charitable organization, and Doyle Gipson (Samuel L. Jackson), an insurance salesman and recovering alcoholic who is trying to keep his wife from taking his two sons to Oregon. They are both headed to court at the same time when they crash on the FDR highway. Doyle wants to deal with the accident by the book, since he has already cut too many corners in his life, but Gavin has no time for such annoyances. Slapping a blank check in Doyle's hands, he darts off to court, leaving Doyle standing there in the rain. "Better luck next time" is his mocking farewell.

Within minutes, the drama of the story is laid out. Doyle misses his hearing, which means that he will lose his family, while Gavin arrives a few minutes late to court and discovers that a key document is absent from his suitcase. He must have left it at the accident scene and Doyle must have it.

As anger and resentment grow, the story becomes an old-fashioned revenger's tale, with each man trying to punish the other. As the "vengeance is mine" scenarios

escalate, it becomes clear that these two men have something in common after all, namely, that they are both good men who have gone bad over time, and that this battle provides a chance for atonement.

*Changing Lanes* is co-written by veteran scriptwriter Michael Tolkin, who was brought in to do a rewrite for novice screenwriter Chap Taylor (who also claims the "story by" credit). Though it is never easy to figure out who wrote what on such a collaboration, the ominous mood and religious overtones have all the earmarks of Tolkin's previous work.

Tolkin is best known as the writer of Robert Altman's *The Player* (based on Tolkin's own novel), about a man who seeks redemption after wallowing too long in Hollywood. Tolkin was also the writer-director of *The Rapture*, one of the most audacious religious movies ever made (it starts as a realistic tale of one woman's fall from grace and ends with the arrival, in full battle gear, of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse).

Tolkin senses the spiritual connection between a man's work and his ultimate destiny. The movie includes such scenes as the two lost men running into each other in front of a church, and Gavin staggering into a Catholic confessional not to seek forgiveness for his sins but to rant to the priest about the filth and corruption that dominate the world. (Like many men on the brink of a spiritual crisis, Gavin's first instinct is to claim that "Everyone's doing it!")

The evil that men do and the question of why they do it are subjects of a running commentary. And there are characters who become underworld guides, including William Hurt as Doyle's AA sponsor, who speaks of Doyle's "addiction to chaos," and Toni Collette as Gavin's co-worker and former mistress, who may have unconscious motives as she helps lead him down the road to ruin.

The best performance is by Kim Staunton as Doyle's ex-wife, Valerie. Though Staunton has only a few scenes, they are played with frightening power, suggesting a woman who is sick and tired of being immersed in a cauldron of confusion. It is her reaction to Doyle's dilemma, in fact, that forces Doyle to see that perhaps he is not merely the victim but also the enabler of the day's anguish.

Late in the film, Gavin delivers a quiet speech about a pretty girl he once saw on the beach and about how his life might have turned out differently if only he had asked

that girl her name. "This day is that girl," he observes. The speech is reminiscent of a monologue delivered by Mr. Bernstein in *Citizen Kane*, concerning a woman in a white dress he once spotted on the Jersey shore, a woman who clearly represents goodness. "I only saw her for one second, and she didn't see me at all," Bernstein says, "but I'll bet a month hasn't gone by since that I haven't thought of that girl."

There may be no stunning "Rosebud" moment in *Changing Lanes*, but in pointing to the ways redemption can change people's lives, it's in pretty good company.