

Noir lite

reviewed by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [November 15, 2003](#) issue

In *Out of Time*, Matt Whitlock (played by Denzel Washington), a police chief in a small Florida town, is sleeping with Ann Merai (Sanaa Lathan), his high school girl friend, now unhappily married to a local brute (Dean Cain). Ann can't catch a break: she learns that she has cancer, and she can't afford the only treatment that might save her life. So Matt lets her have a suitcase full of cash--the gleanings from a drug bust that his office is babysitting for the federal drug officers. He figures that the wheels of justice spin so slowly he'll have enough time to replace it before the dealers come up for trial.

That night Ann's house is torched, and her corpse and her husband's turn up inside. Matt realizes he's the prime suspect. Like Ray Milland in the 1948 suspense film *The Big Clock* (or Kevin Costner in its 1987 remake *No Way Out*), he has to tap dance furiously to keep ahead of the mounting evidence against him (and the government bigwigs who suddenly want the suitcase back) while he tries to solve the murders himself. And he has to outrace his own estranged wife, Alex (Eva Mendes), a homicide detective.

The moment when Matt hands that suitcase full of ill-gotten gains over to Ann is a classic film noir set-up. Film noir is the genre that explores the dark side of the human psyche, and often pivots on the misjudged actions of ordinary people who succumb to temptation. In the classic noirs, they're men (like Fred MacMurray in *Double Indemnity* and John Garfield in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*) who are duped by femmes fatales. But in Sam Raimi's deeply unsettling 1998 *A Simple Plan*, it's money that lures the protagonist (Bill Paxton), a small-time businessman who's never before broken the law. When he, his brother and a friend find a cache of money in a crashed plane, they allow themselves to be swept away by the promise of how this stolen wealth might alter their lives. It does, but not in the ways they'd hoped. *A Simple Plan* is about the potential for even the most decent people to tumble into the darkness; that's why the story is so upsetting.

Though noir is the sexiest and sometimes the most violent of movie genres, films of this kind are steadied--and the best are deepened--by their moral weight. Actions matter; they have consequences, generally pretty dire ones.

Out of Time is well acted and beautifully directed by Carl Franklin from a script by Dave Collard. It has a great, steamy look (courtesy of the photographer, Theo Van de Sande) and an infectious, bluesy score (by Graeme Revell). What's missing is the weight that would infuse the components in Collard's increasingly preposterous plot with some meaning.

Washington's character isn't expected to pay for his errors in judgment; by the end, thanks to the loyalty and improvisational skills of his best friend, the coroner (John Billingsley, bearing the lion's share of the film's humor), and the undiminished affections of his not-quite ex-wife, it's as if the errors had never happened. One of my friends called the movie's refusal to carry through on the implications of Matt's transgressions a failure of nerve; it's also a failure of moral imagination.

The movie is fun to watch, especially the early, sizzling scenes between Washington and the stunning and talented Lathan. The problem is the script. Franklin, perhaps America's most gifted African-American filmmaker, is stuck jazzing up the surface of a movie that is nothing but surface.

Franklin is responsible for two of the best film noirs of the 1990s. *One False Move* is about a white cop on a murder case involving a black woman whose child he fathered. In *Devil in a Blue Dress*, Washington plays an unemployed war veteran paid to track down a white woman who's disappeared into the black substratum of 1940s L.A.

These movies, in which race is the wild card that scrambles the noir conventions, pay off emotionally, and that's why they stay with you. *Devil in a Blue Dress* is a different kind of noir from *Out of Time*--the hard-boiled detective kind that has its origins in *The Maltese Falcon*--yet it too imagines the consequences of its protagonist's actions. Washington cheats on a buddy by bedding his girl, and when she turns up dead, his indiscretion lingers in the air, even though his friend is unaware of it; it colors the awkward, complex scene in which he drops by to offer his condolences.

Another noir film with Washington under Franklin's direction might have been a knockout, but *Out of Time* is flimsy stuff.