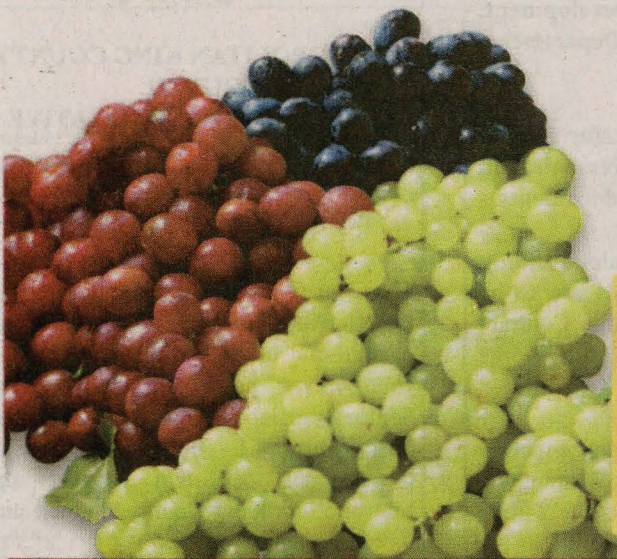


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ENTERTAINMENT

Movie Review: Focus



Will Smith and Margot Robbie co-star in the con artist movie Focus.

By Dwight Brown
NNPA Film Critic

After *Earth*, *Men in Black 3*, *Seven Pounds*... It's been a while since Will Smith lived up to his star status in a film worth having his name above the marquee. As Nicky, a con artist's con artist in *Focus*, he redeems himself somewhat in a generic but often entertaining game of who's fooling who.

Nicky Spurgeon — part con artist and part thief — was trained by his dad and granddad in the fine art of deception: Focus your victim's attention in one direction, while you steal him blind out of his line of vision. One night in a New York bar, Jess (Margot Robbie, *The Wolf of Wall Street*), a novice shyster, picks him up and brings him back to her hotel. Her enraged husband barges into the room demanding money from Nicky, or he'll kill him. Don't BS a BSer. Nick knows the two are on the con. He schools them. That would have been the end of a strange night, except Jess wants to learn the ropes from a master and Nicky is smitten with the svelte blonde.

Nicky works Jess into his gang of thieves. In New Orleans, they pickpocket, swipe jewelry and steal money with a nerve and rhythm that is precision. At a football game, Nicky schemes on a wealthy man named Liyuan (BD Wong) who likes to bet on anything. He pulls an unwitting Jess into his ruse. Once he's done, he leaves her. Three years later in Buenos Aires, Nicky shows up for a job involving the racecar world and a coveted algorithm. He's working for a slick dude named Garriga (Rodrigo Santoro). He's shocked one night when he finds a beautiful blonde cozying up to his mark. It's Jess.

The cagey film *The Gifters*, starring Annette Bening, Anjelica Houston and John Cusack, directed by Stephen Frears, set the bar real high for all con artist movies that followed. This nicely crafted and very slick looking production isn't as gripping or original as the aforementioned, but that doesn't stop it from being fun. You won't be astonished, but you won't be bored either.

Writer/directors Glenn Ficarra and John Requa (*Crazy, Stupid, Love*) mix in enough hijinks (thieves working a New Orleans crowd), violence (a car crash, punched faces and gun play) and titillation (Smith goes bare chest, Robbie does not, their modest love sex scene lacks chemistry) to keep your interests piqued. The screenplay has a lot of twists and turns, and you can't quite guess where the story is leading, though you know instinctively that a big con is coming.

Jan Kovac's (*Curb Your Enthusiasm*) editing is pretty nimble and well accommodates the film's four acts, which unfold in 104 minutes. There is a happy marriage between Xavier Grobet's (*Mother and Child*) glossy cinematography, Beth Mickle's (*Thanks for Sharing*) production design and Kelly Curley's art direction, which tends to favor teal blue. The musical score by Nick Urata (*I Love You Phillip Morris*) is reminiscent of 1980s hip nightclub music, like the hit song "Ghost Town" by The Specials.

Margot Robbie, certainly tall and beautiful in a Victoria Secrets kind of way, has a tough interior. Adrian Martinez (*American Hustle*) as Farhad, one of Nicky's cronies, brings humor to the gang. As Jess sits in the back seat and Nicky drives the car, Farhad blurts out, "You hitting that?" Gerald McRaney (*TV's House of Cards*) plays the perfect henchman. Rodrigo Santoro is fine as the Argentinean playboy, but he was much more electric in *300: Rise of an Empire*.

Will Smith carries this film on shoulders. His cool demeanor and devil-may-care attitude are appealing. He has tremendous stage presence and he knows how to work the camera. Physically, for a 47 year-old-man, he's in great shape and aging like Dorian Grey. What Smith's career needs now, is a blockbuster that can put him back on top of the heap.

Focus is a bit too slick, but engaging nonetheless. It doesn't give up. It doesn't stop. Or, as Nicky puts it, "Never drop the con. Die with the lie."

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