

SUNDANCE REVIEWS

ALPHA DOG ★★★

Starring Emile Hirsch, Justin Timberlake, Anton Yelchin, Shawn Hatosy, Ben Foster, Fernando Vargas, Sharon Stone and Bruce Willis. Directed and written by Nick Cassavetes. Produced by Sidney Kimmel and Chuck Pacheco. A New Line release. Crime drama. Rated R for pervasive drug use and language, strong violence, sexuality and nudity. Running time: 125 min.



Justin Timberlake is flanked by his posse in "Alpha Dog."

What starts off as another seeming teenboy-targeted flick celebrating would-be gangbangers becomes a more interesting docudrama about a kidnapping turned tragic in Nick Cassavetes' "Alpha Dog." Based on the true tale of Southern Californian drug dealer Jesse James Hollywood and events surrounding the abduction of a rival's younger brother, the cinematic adaptation of the sordid story appears to take great dramatic liberties, but much of them to absorbing effect.

Hollywood's big-screen incarnation is Johnny Truelove (Emile Hirsch), a local drug dealer and the head of a San Gabriel Valley gang of testosterone-pumped, low-level thugs that includes Frankie (Justin Timberlake), Elvis (Shawn Hatosy) and Tiko (Fernando Vargas). The fairly affluent group spends most of its time hanging out, drinking and partying, until a disruption one night from Jake (an impassioned Ben Foster) changes their priorities. Because Jake is not only unable to repay a huge drug-related debt, but is actually combative and disrespectful to Johnny, all-out war between the two is declared. Jake makes the first move by trashing Johnny's strangely uncharacteristic modernist home. Johnny retaliates by nabbing Jake's half-brother Zack (Anton Yelchin), a guileless 15-year-old who admires his much tougher older sibling and is eager to fit in.

From this narrative turn, "Alpha Dog" begins to emphasize its basis on "actual events" by indicating a running count of the witnesses to Zack's kidnapping.

Cassavetes is skillful at creating a plausible scenario in which not one of what ultimately totals 38 witnesses come forward during the abduction. In the atmosphere of non-stop parties and Zack's own indulgence in the booze and girls during his three-day captivity, the reality of the criminality of the act doesn't occur to anyone involved—that is, until Johnny learns about the likelihood of hard prison time. Faced with the consequences of his impromptu offense, Johnny belatedly decides to wipe out the damning evidence of his crime, bringing the series of events to their fatal conclusion.

Cluttered with melodrama and, at times, what looks to be a glamorization of the world of imitation gang culture, "Alpha Dog" is not without its obvious shortcomings. What pushes these faults to the background are a handful of standout performances, perhaps most notably Foster's, who burns the screen with the energy of his unchecked rage one moment, only to change gears by portraying a passionately devoted brother the next.

Also delivering on the goods are Hirsch, who embodies Truelove's drive to maintain dominance, and a surprisingly consistent Timberlake, who attempts to serve as the last refuge of decency as the overseer and eventual friend of the kidnapped victim. Superstar cameos by Sharon Stone as Zack's overprotective but frantically loving mother and Bruce Willis as Johnny's enabling father work to book-end the film's young ensemble cast. —*Francesca Dinglasan*

LUCKY NUMBER SLEVIN ★★1/2

Starring Josh Hartnett, Morgan Freeman, Ben Kingsley, Lucy Liu, Stanley Tucci and Bruce Willis. Directed by Paul McGuigan. Written by Jason Smilovic. Produced by Chris Roberts, Christopher Eberts, Kia Jam, Anthony Rhulen, Robert Kravis and Tyler Mitchell. A Weinstein release. Thriller. Rated R for profanity and strong violence. Running time: 110 min.

Involving an intricate, multilayered story structure constructed around a case of mistaken identity, "Lucky Number Slevin," boosted as it is by a serious A-list ensemble cast and a heavy dose of intrigue, crosses the unfortunate line between clever and pretentious, rendering itself tiresome long before its heavily built-up denouement. Screenwriter Jason Smilovic's dialogue, which fills characters' mouths with fast-paced exchanges and protracted analogies, has been described in production notes as the film's "heightened language." And while purposefully stylized and unnatural, the

affected speech that becomes the pic's hallmark serves to distract from, rather than enhance, the genuinely gripping labyrinth of twists and turns.

At the center of "Lucky Number Slevin's" maelstrom is the eponymous Slevin (Josh Hartnett), whose run of bad luck hits an all-time high the moment he arrives in New York City to stay with his friend Nick (Sam Jaeger). Finding his old buddy's apartment empty, Slevin decides to settle in while awaiting Nick's eventual return. Slevin subsequently is abducted by a set of bodyguards and taken to the penthouse of The Boss (Morgan Freeman), who thinks that Slevin is Nick. It seems that Nick owes The Boss, and The Boss plans to cash in by having Nick—who is really, of course, poor Slevin—off the son of a rival. If Nick/Slevin doesn't agree to the deed, he will be the one killed. Returned to the apartment, Slevin is nabbed by a second set of thugs. Delivered to the penthouse suite of The Rabbi (Ben Kingsley), located directly across the street from The Boss' abode, Slevin is once again thought to be Nick, who is also deep in debt to The Rabbi. Sworn enemies with The Boss, The Rabbi also gives Nick/Slevin the choice to destroy his nemesis or else die himself. Complicating matters is the fact that Slevin is being tracked by a mysterious assassin named Goodkat (Bruce Willis), who is somehow manipulating the not-so coincidental circumstances, as well as an NYC detective (Stanley Tucci) investigating the two crime bosses. Slevin's sole confidant in this muddle is Nick's perky and adventurous neighbor Lindsey (Lucy Liu), whose involvement with her newfound friend takes an intimate turn.

In addition to the embellished conversations that admittedly roll off the tongues of the veteran thespians comprising the cast, every formal element of "Lucky Number Slevin" is hyper-ornate, from its multidimensional interior design motifs to an ever-changing array of camera angles and distances. The effect is not simply exhaustive, it's exhausting. Audiences would do best to concentrate their energy on the film's maze of plotlines rather than its visual gymnastics.

Performances by heavyweights Kingsley and Freeman play nicely off of one another, while Willis manages to embody understatement and detachment, despite the requirements of his character's verbal dynamics. Hartnett, meanwhile, makes the most of a role that ping-pongs him from smart-ass victim of circumstance to romantic lead. —*Francesca Dinglasan*