



**BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**

# Devil in a Blue Dress

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

Even as Carl Franklin's *Devil in a Blue Dress* opens in Britain, its presence in the United States has all but evaporated – the critically acclaimed film has earned only \$15 million in six weeks. *Devil* isn't the only film to go belly up last autumn (*Strange Days* and *Assassins* are two other big-ticket flops), but in some ways its failure is the most alarming, indicating as it does Hollywood's failure to sell to mainstream America a black film that defies both stereotype and expectation. Written and directed by the well-respected Franklin, based on a novel by one of the most lauded of modern American detective writers, with one of the industry's hottest stars at its fore, *Devil in a Blue Dress* is a movie that should not have failed. The film racked up reams of glowing reviews and seemed to have a lock on the very best in publicity. Still, there were signs of weakness in the print and television campaigns. One could blame it on O.J. (one LA movie reviewer announced that, post-O.J., white people were too angry to get behind *Strange Days* and its message of racial unity) or just maybe blame it on an industry that one hundred years after its launch still can't escape the Jim Crow logic of separate-but-equal in movies as in life.

Close to the end of the film, Easy Rawlins, a former aircraft worker who's gotten tangled up in mystery and murder runs up a dark staircase, clutching his stomach. Hurt, exhausted and driven by a purpose not yet fully understood, Easy is going to see his old friend Joppy, who may or may not have done him a great wrong. The camera waits for him, picking him out from the shadows. The scene is familiar, a blurred memory from a dozen films *noirs*: the hero, maybe Robert Mitchum, maybe Burt Lancaster, races upstairs. He's wounded and terminally alone. Except that, this time, the scene is shaded differently; this time the man stumbling towards his destiny is played by Denzel Washington.

Based on the sensationally popular novel by Walter Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress* is Franklin's follow-up to *One False Move*, his deceptively simple, brutally-felt genre-bender. Both films are crime stories in which violence is less a matter of guts and gunplay than of human passions and the American calamity known as race. Set in post-second World War LA, *Devil* reaches beyond the co-ordinates of story and genre. Although it plays its hand against a pulp tradition that reaches from Raymond Chandler to Chester Himes, the existential crises upon which it twists and turns are rooted in history.

Like a lot of classic *noir*, *Devil in a Blue Dress* opens while the sun is still shining. The camera prowls through a busy Central Avenue afternoon and into Joppy's bar, stopping on Easy, sitting alone at a table. Easy is out of work, and recently fired from a good job. Still, there's a drink on his table. As for the room, it's a study in brown – not the sepia of nostalgia but a dirty yellow through years of nicotine and casual neglect. There are other men in the bar but they're just silhouettes, gone soft in the fading light. Then a white man walks in, and Easy's world collapses.

At the core of *Devil in a Blue Dress*, is a mystery and a couple of murders. Easy has seen death before as a GI in Europe but there's a different kind of death that walks in with the white man, Dewitt Albright. It has to do with the soul, and what it means to put yourself up on the auction block. Because she's known to stray into the company of black men, Albright figures on Easy to search Daphne out ('she likes jazz, pig's feet and dark meat, know what I mean?') The pay is \$100, more than enough to take care of Easy's mortgage. Easy eventually finds Daphne but only after he's been plunged into political, racial and sexual intrigue. The central mystery, which works fine in the novel, doesn't make sense in the film because of the curiously misjudged casting of Jennifer Beals as Daphne. The mistake, however, is not a ruinous one. All it proves is that Franklin's heart lies less with the specificity of film *noir* and detective fiction than in the ways he can use them. Franklin's adaptation is faster and leaner than Mosley's book. It knows how to hit the funny notes as well as the hardboiled. Its surprises aren't in empty cigarette packages and dribbles of blood but in unfathomables like love and hate and the way a man called Mouse can be Easy's oldest friend and still turn a gun on him. Don Cheadle's Mouse is the single biggest shock in the film. Compact, with lustrous ebony skin and a gold cap that catches light, Cheadle enters laughing, maybe because he knows he's about to steal home. Washington may never have been as good as he is here but he pales significantly next to his friend.

Such characters and concerns are new to the American screen but for all of its convolutions, the first half of *Devil* holds to a deliberate, occasionally slow pace with few fluctuations in tone – it's easy does it. When the pace picks up, the body count does too: rage floods the scene then drops to a savage whisper. The first devil that Easy meets is a corpulent creep with a pet baby boy. The second wears a sky blue dress; the third a crisp fedora and a neatly pressed suit and then there's the devil who stares back when things go sour, and the one who comes up from Texas with two cocked guns and a swallowing grin – a Southern Gothic gone north to remind Easy where he's come from. 'They thought I was some kind of new fool,' says Easy at one point of his voice over, 'and I guess I was.' For better and sometimes worse, Easy has left Joppy's bar for good. He's put the noir back into film *noir* and crossed over into the world; there's no turning back.

**Manohla Dargis, *Sight & Sound*, January 1996**

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## DEVIL IN A BLUE DRESS

*Director:* Carl Franklin  
*©:* TriStar Pictures, Inc.  
*Production Companies:* Clinica Estetico, Mundy Lane Entertainment  
*Executive Producers:* Jonathan Demme, Edward Saxon, Denzel Washington  
*Producers:* Gary Goetzman, Jesse Beaton  
*Associate Producers:* Walter Mosley, Donna Gigliotti, Thomas Imperato  
*Production Accountant:* Steven Shareshian  
*Production Co-ordinator:* Christa Vausbinder  
*Unit Production Manager:* Charles Skouras III  
*Location Manager:* Wayne Middleton  
*1st Assistant Director:* Katterli Frauenfelder  
*2nd Assistant Director:* Mark Cotone  
*Script Supervisor:* Annie Welles  
*Casting:* Victoria Thomas  
*Screenplay:* Carl Franklin  
*Based on the book by:* Walter Mosley  
*Director of Photography:* Tak Fujimoto  
*Chief Lighting Technician:* Gary B. Tandrow  
*Lenses and Panaflex Camera by:* Panavision  
*Camera Operator:* P. Scott Sakamoto  
*B Camera Operator:* Malcolm M. Brown Jr  
*1st Assistant Camera:* Baird Steptoe  
*2nd Assistant Camera:* S. Beth Horton  
*Key Grip:* Bob Rose  
*Steadicam Operator:* P. Scott Sakamoto  
*Rigging Gaffer:* Jerry Enright  
*Stills Photography:* Bruce W. Talamon, D. Stevens  
*Visual and Digital Effects by:* D-Rez  
*Special Effects Supervisor:* Thomas R. Ward  
*Graphic Designer:* Martin Charles  
*Editor:* Carole Kravetz  
*Production Designer:* Gary Frutkoff  
*Art Director:* Dan Webster  
*Set Designers:* Lauren Polizzi, Cheryl Smith  
*Set Decorator:* Kathryn Peters  
*Costume Designer:* Sharen Davis  
*Costume Supervisor:* Mira Zavidowsky  
*Key Make-up Artist:* Edna M. Sheen  
*Key Hairstylist:* Ken Walker  
*Titles:* Pablo Ferro  
*Music:* Elmer Bernstein  
*Orchestrations:* Emilie A. Bernstein  
*Choreography:* Tony Selznick, Russell Clark  
*Sound Mixer:* Ken Segal  
*Re-recording Mixers:* Gary Bourgeois, Dan Sherman  
*Supervising Sound Editor:* Robert Grieve  
*Stunt Co-ordinator:* Tony Brubaker

## Cast

Denzel Washington (*Ezekiel 'Easy' Rawlins*)  
Jennifer Beals (*Daphne Monet/Ruby Hanks*)  
Tom Sizemore (*Dewitt Albright*)  
Don Cheadle (*Mouse*)  
Maury Chaykin (*Matthew Terell*)  
Terry Kinney (*Todd Carter*)  
Mel Winkler (*Joppy Shag*)  
Lisa Nicole Carson (*Coretta James*)  
Albert Hall (*Odell*)  
Jernard Burks (*Dupree Brouchard*)  
David Fonteno (*Junior Fornay*)  
John Roselius (*Detective Jackie Mason*)  
Beau Starr (*Detective Miller*)  
Steven Randazzo (*Benny Giacomo*)  
Scott Lincoln (*Richard McGee*)  
L. Scott Caldwell (*Hattie Parsons*)  
Barry 'Shabaka' Henley (*woodcutter*)  
Nicky Corello (*Shariff*)  
Kenny Endoso (*Manny*)  
Joseph Latimore (*Frank Green*)  
Renée Humphrey (*Barbara*)  
Robert J. Knoll (*Herman*)  
Kai Lennox (*Football*)  
Poppy Montgomery (*Barbara's sister*)  
Brendan Kelly (*Norman, Terell's chauffeur*)  
Peggy Rea (*Carter's secretary*)  
Vinny Argiro (*Baxter, Carter's valet*)  
Deborah Lacey (*Sophie*)  
Brazylia Kotere (*neighbourhood woman*)  
Jeris Lee Poindexter (*Alphonso Jenkins*)  
Frank Davis (*butcher*)  
Matt Barry (*cop in car*)  
Mark Cotone (*cop in station*)  
Brian E. O'Neal (*John's band singer*)  
G. Smokey Campbell (*nightclub owner*)  
Alan Craig Schwartz (*Johnny*)  
Steve Sekely (*Abe*)  
J.D. Smith (*pool hall owner*)  
Nigel Gibbs (*bootlegger*)

USA 1995©

101 mins

The screening on Wed 17 Nov will be introduced by *Empire Magazine*  
Contributing Editor Amon Warmann

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## BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

### Chinatown

Mon 18 Oct 14:15; Sun 24 Oct 11:50;  
Wed 27 Oct 14:15; Sat 20 Nov 20:30

### Inside Man

Mon 18 Oct 17:50; Mon 8 Nov 20:30;  
Thu 25 Nov 14:30; Tue 30 Nov 20:20

### House of Bamboo

Mon 18 Oct 18:00; Thu 4 Nov 20:50;  
Thu 11 Nov 14:30; Mon 15 Nov 18:10

### Heat

Tue 19 Oct 14:00; Sun 24 Oct 14:30;  
Sat 13 Nov 16:30; Mon 15 Nov 13:40

### Kiss Me Deadly

Tue 19 Oct 18:00; Fri 5 Nov 20:40;  
Sat 20 Nov 18:00; Sat 28 Nov 12:15

### Devil in a Blue Dress

Wed 20 Oct 17:55; Thu 28 Oct 20:50; Wed 17 Nov 18:00 (+ intro by  
*Empire Magazine* Contributing Editor Amon Warmann)

### Un Flic

Wed 20 Oct 18:10 (+ pre-recorded introduction by film critic  
Christina Newland); Fri 22 Oct 14:20; Tue 23 Nov 20:45;  
Mon 29 Nov 20:55

### The Long Goodbye

Wed 20 Oct 20:50; Wed 10 Nov 17:50 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew,  
Programmer-at-Large); Sat 27 Nov 20:40

### The Manchurian Candidate

Thu 21 Oct 14:15; Sun 21 Nov 14:50

### Illustrious Corpses (Cadaveri eccellenti)

Thu 21 Oct 20:30; Mon 25 Oct 14:15; Fri 19 Nov 20:40; Sat 27 Nov 18:10

### Murder on the Orient Express

Sat 23 Oct 17:30; Sun 7 Nov 18:10; Tue 16 Nov 14:15

### Blue Velvet

Tue 26 Oct 14:30; Tue 2 Nov 18:00; Sat 13 Nov 20:45; Sun 21 Nov 17:40

### Dirty Harry

Wed 27 Oct 18:00 (+ pre-recorded intro by film scholar Hannah Hamad,  
Cardiff University); Sun 14 Nov 18:20; Fri 26 Nov 20:45

### The Silence of the Lambs

Fri 29 Oct 20:40; Wed 3 Nov 19:00 (+ pre-recorded intro by Professor  
Yvonne Tasker, author of BFI Film Classics *The Silence of the Lambs*);  
Thu 18 Nov 14:40

### No Country for Old Men

Sat 30 Oct 11:00; Mon 1 Nov 20:30; Wed 24 Nov 18:00 (+ intro by  
Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large)

### In the Cut

Sun 31 Oct 18:30; Tue 30 Nov 18:10

### Zero Dark Thirty

Sat 6 Nov 17:30; Tue 9 Nov 14:15; Sun 28 Nov 15:20

### Shaft

Fri 12 Nov 20:50; Tue 23 Nov 18:20