

## Blu-Ray Review: 'Middle Men' Offers Slick, Hollow Entertainment

Submitted by [mattmoviemann](#) [1] on February 17, 2011 - 4:38pm

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CHICAGO – “Middle Men” marks somewhat of a comeback for director George Gallo, since his recent career has been marred by a series of poorly received comedies. As a writer, Gallo’s films can be as great as “Midnight Run,” and as awful as “The Whole Ten Yards.” “Men” appropriately falls somewhere in the middle, though it’s easily Gallo’s most entertaining film in years.

It’s clear from the get-go that “Men” desperately wants to do for the online porn business what “Goodfellas” did for the mob. At it’s best, the picture functions as sort of a low-rent “Boogie Nights,” though Gallo is obviously no Paul Thomas Anderson. “Men” sticks to the Scorsesian stylebook without bothering to truly explore the psyches of its characters, resulting in a film comprised entirely of shiny, shallow surfaces.



Blu-Ray Rating: **2.5/5.0**

Luke Wilson plays natural-born problem solver Jack Harris with the same bemused expression and casual presence he carries when advertising AT&T. He’s a likable guy, but hardly magnetic enough to anchor this film, which requires an actor charismatic enough to talk himself out of endless sticky situations with gun-toting Russian heavies. Jack starts out as a mild-mannered family man who thinks he can better support his family by helping two dim-witted hot heads, Wayne (Giovanni Ribisi) and Buck (Gabriel Macht), realize the profitable potential of their new business, offering viral eroticism to horny guys around the globe. By facilitating transactions between two parties and taking a cut from the purchased porn, the three guys become literal ‘middle men,’ in charge of an immensely lucrative internet billing company. Unfortunately, Jack suggests his plan after the two lunkheads unwisely strike a deal with the Russian mob. Another complication arises in the form of Jerry Haggerty (James Caan), a scheming lawyer who’s ejected from the company right before it starts making millions.

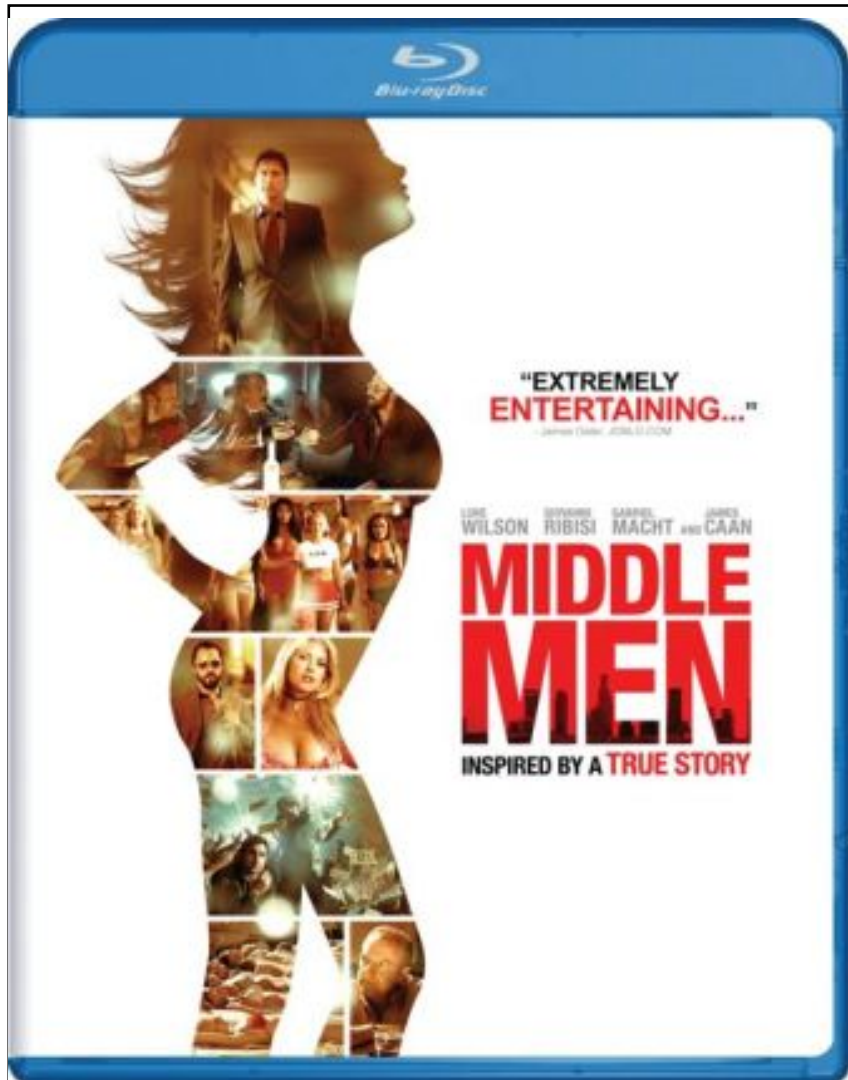


Luke Wilson stars in George Gallo’s Middle Men.

Photo credit: Paramount Home Entertainment

Caan’s subtly threatening portrayal instantly brings the film to life whenever he’s onscreen, compensating for Wilson’s pedestrian line readings. Wilson’s performance isn’t bad, but it fails to adequately convey the inner complexities of a man who would abandon his wife and children in favor of a 23-year-old prostitute (Laura Ramsey, who appears in one scene decked out in full “Lolita” garb). Without a lead capable

of engaging the audience, Jack simply comes off as a douche thoroughly undeserving of a happy ending. Wayne and Buck are such broad caricatures that they might as well be cartoons, which wouldn't be as much of a problem if the film were a straightforward satire. Instead, the movie wants to be both a gaudy celebration of indulgence and a cautionary drama about addictive lifestyles. It's as hypocritical a picture as "The Devil Wears Prada," which resembled a 90-minute fashion ad before pretending to grow a conscience in its final act, with a message of anti-materialism cheerfully ignored by its starry-eyed viewers. Since the story in "Middle Men" is impossible to care about, the audience is able to enjoy its considerable pleasures from an entirely detached perspective. The exuberant cinematography tirelessly finds new ways to zoom in on the action, occasionally cutting to intrusive close-ups shot with a jittery, hand-cranked camera. There's enough swish pans here to send some viewers to the hospital with a nasty case of cinematic whiplash. It's a fun ride, as hollow and disposable as online porn.



Middle Men was released on Blu-Ray and DVD on Feb. 8, 2011.

Photo credit: Paramount Home Entertainment

"Middle Men" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 1.85:1 aspect ratio), and includes six minutes of deleted scenes, the best of which is a flashback sequence where a teenage Jack is offered advice by his ailing father, played by Christopher McDonald in a very strong performance. There's also a more complex argument between husband and wife where Jack accuses Diane of not taking responsibility for her own involvement in his work—spending his money without caring where it comes from. The only scene worth cutting is an extended moment with Caan that spoils a key plot twist. The disc earns points for bookending its deleted footage with scenes from the film in order to illustrate where each segment fits into the film's puzzle-like structure.

In a self-satisfied yet fairly insightful commentary track, Gallo is joined by cinematographer Lukas Ettlin and editor Malcolm Campbell. The plot was inspired by the real life adventures of producer Christopher Mallick, who first shared his stories with Gallo in the form of a "stream of consciousness," which inspired the film's rambling rhythm and nonlinear storytelling. Gallo's mantra during production was, "F—k you, keep up," which is no surprise, considering that the film throws information at its audience like a sadistic teacher forcing students to utilize shorthand when taking notes. The director says that it was never his goal to "make a value judgment on the world." He wanted to play up the idea of sexuality as "something fun," which is reflected in the picture's limitless array of eye candy. There's an interesting dissection of the film's visual detail, and how subtle elements of the film's art direction contribute greatly to the overarching atmosphere of a particular scene, such as how floating dandelions intensify the romance of an embrace, or how a disco ball assists in the objectification of a character. Gallo defends the film's in-your-face camerawork by saying that he wanted his audience to feel as if they were being visually pulled into the story, though he claims that he forced himself to cut a potentially impressive Steadicam shot because he didn't want to look like he was showing off.

'Middle Men' is released by Paramount Home Entertainment and stars Luke Wilson, Giovanni Ribisi, Gabriel Macht, James Caan, Jacinda Barrett, Laura Ramsey, Rade Serbedzija and Kevin Pollak. It was written by George Gallo & Andy Weiss and directed by George Gallo. It was released on Feb. 8, 2011. It is rated R.



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