

Blu-Ray Review: Tom Cruise's Star Power Shines Bright in 'The Firm'

Submitted by [mattmovieman](#) [1] on May 31, 2011 - 9:49am

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CHICAGO – Sydney Pollack was a filmmaker who could do anything: sweeping romantic melodramas, side-splitting satires and epic yet intimate tragedies. It's easy to forget that Pollack could also craft a superb commercial thriller every once in a while, and 1993's "The Firm" falls under that category. Despite a few dated elements, the picture holds up surprisingly well.

Author John Grisham and star Tom Cruise were both at the peak of their powers when audiences first flocked to this legal thriller, based on Grisham's hit 1991 novel of the same name. After playing a series of young hotshots tutored by veteran mentors, Cruise was clearly ready to delve into meatier roles. He delivered the best performance of his career in 1989's "Born on the Fourth of July," and "The Firm" offers ample proof of Cruise's maturity as an actor.



Blu-Ray Rating: **3.5/5.0**

At first glance, the film appears to be little more than a retread of corruption dramas typified by "Wall Street" and "GoodFellas." All of these films begin with an initiation, where an innocent and opportunistic rookie is dazzled by the luxurious lifestyles of suave crooks. Even though Harvard Law alumnus Mitch McDeere (Cruise) believes he's merely joining a small yet comfortably rich Memphis firm, it's bracingly clear to his wife, Abby (Jeanne Tripplehorn of "Big Love"), and everyone in the audience that there's more here than meets the eye. An aura of faux warmth and underlying sleaze seems to pervade every word uttered by senior advisors the likes of Hal Holbrook, not to mention fatherly mentor Gene Hackman. Every member of the firm appears to be white, male and married. The multitude of red flags are visible to Abby, while Mitch remains oblivious. Why, she asks, does the firm encourage its members to procreate? Why are new members showered with expensive gifts? And at a funeral mourning the death of two mysteriously offed associates, why does Hackman look so darn content? The first act of this 154-minute popcorn movie is hastily paced and not wholly involving, but once the nature of Cruise's prison is fully revealed in the film's second hour, "The Firm" springs to life.



Gene Hackman and Tom Cruise star in Sydney Pollack's The Firm.

Photo credit: Paramount Home Entertainment

When an FBI agent materializes in the form Ed Harris (who has a knack for popping up ominously midway through pictures), it's clear to Mitch

that life as he knows it has come to an abrupt end. With his house bugged and his fidelity tested, Mitch is urged by his corrupt bosses and FBI contacts to break the law in order to save his neck. What's most fascinating about the plot is the methods Mitch utilizes to regain his freedom by actually following the law. Similar in spirit to Pollack's underrated final feature, 2005's "The Interpreter," this film is a fine example of slow burn suspense. Cruise does an excellent job of conveying his character's mounting fear and crippling guilt. In one quietly gripping climactic scene, Mitch must maintain the poise of a tightrope walker as he navigates his way through a potential minefield of a conversation with fearsome mobsters. "Saw" fans will immediately recognize the killer eyes of Tobin Bell, who exudes Rutger Hauer-like iciness as a homicidal thug credited as "The Nordic Man" (how badass is that?). Yet the most frightening performance is surprisingly delivered by Wilford Brimley as a gruff security head with a penchant for leering behind his sinister sunglasses.



The Firm was released on Blu-Ray on May 23, 2011.

Photo credit: Paramount Home Entertainment

As good as "The Firm" is at times, it does suffer from bouts of hokiness. The script co-written by longtime Cruise vehicle scribe Robert Towne ("Chinatown") sounds painfully written in spots, such as when Abby broods, "Somewhere...a firm is listening..." Several tense scenes are marred by Dave Grusin's score, which was inexplicably nominated for an Oscar, despite its tonally inappropriate diversions into upbeat jazz. But, to be fair, the score does have its effectively subtle moments, particularly when Cruise steps into a room crowded with co-workers, whose silent faces coldly observe him. This scene delivers a definite chill, and is eerily reminiscent of a similar sequence in Stanley Kubrick's "Eyes Wide Shut" (which re-teamed Cruise and Pollack). Also Oscar nominated is Holly Hunter, who rises to the challenge of creating a tangible character despite scant screen time. She trembles effectively as Mitch's key ally, but her silly wardrobe seems to have been borrowed from Dustin Hoffman's drag act in "Tootsie." Hackman is especially strong toward the end, when his character reveals his inner self loathing.

But this is Cruise's picture through and through, and his magnetism has stood the test of time. Though couch-jumping and Scientological babble have tarnished his reputation considerably, it's worth remembering that Cruise has always had pristine acting chops to go along with his slick good looks. Though he's recently become somewhat of a self-parody (see "Knight and Day"), "The Firm" stands as a reminder of the A-list star Cruise was and could be again. Even Cruise haters may find themselves entertained by this clever lark—after all, it is fun to watch the guy squirm.

The digitally remastered "Best Buy Exclusive" edition of "The Firm" is presented in crystalline 1080p High Definition (with a 1.78:1 aspect ratio), and includes two trailers. It's easy to see how these promotional materials greatly added to the hype machine behind this smash hit. There's an especially enticing teaser narrated by a deliciously malevolent Holbrook, who states, "I have faith you'll be with us for a long, long time..." All that's missing is a Vincent Price-like cackle.

'The Firm' is released by Paramount Home Entertainment and stars Tom Cruise, Jeanne Tripplehorn, Gene Hackman, Hal Holbrook, Terry Kinney, Wilford Brimley, Ed Harris, Holly Hunter, David Strathairn, Gary Busey and Tobin Bell. It was written by David Rabe, Robert Towne and David Rayfiel and directed by Sydney Pollack. It was released on May 23, 2011. It is rated R.



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