

Blu-ray Review: Predictable ‘Safe House’ Salvaged by Top-Notch Cast

Submitted by [mattmoviemann](#) [1] on June 7, 2012 - 7:54am

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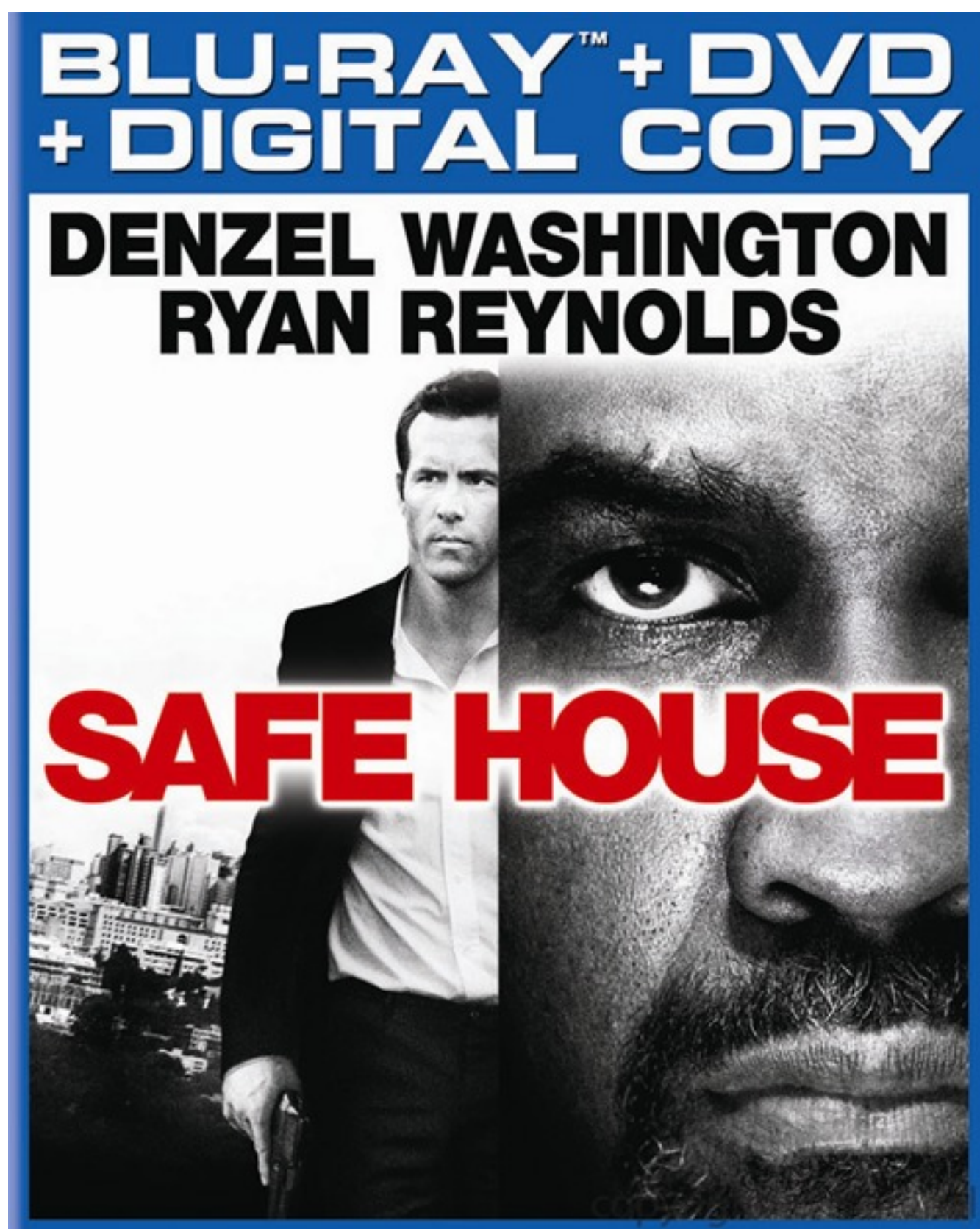
CHICAGO – Some studios seem hellbent on going out of their way to diminish audience expectations prior to a film’s release. The thoughtful, quietly powerful thriller, “The Grey,” was marketed to resemble a silly man vs. wolf action blockbuster, and yet still managed to have a big opening weekend at the box office. Are mainstream audiences seduced by the promise of dreck?

The ads for Daniel Espinosa’s “Safe House” portrayed the film as if it were an uninspired retread of “Training Day,” with a scenery-chewing Denzel Washington causing his screen partner/hostage to squirm with anxiety. Yet the film itself is more intriguing than one may have expected, since the script allows for a healthy dose of moral ambiguity. Sure, some characters are rotten to their core, but the good guys aren’t saints either. CIA agent Matt Weston (Ryan Reynolds) operates from a place of pure-hearted integrity, yet he isn’t above shooting innocents to get a job accomplished.



Blu-ray Rating: **3.0/5.0**

Weston’s first big job is following the tracks of Tobin Frost, an agent-turned-traitor so fearsome that his name is repeatedly announced in hushed tones. Frost is brought into Matt’s safe house in Cape Town, South Africa, and is promptly waterboarded in a sequence that unforgettably depicts the ugliness and inhumanity of American interrogation techniques. Yet Frost barely seems fazed by the experience, and little time has passed before mercenaries invade the house and attempt to gun him down. Weston and Frost make an improbable escape that leads to a wildly chaotic car chase requiring Reynolds to outrace two cars while enduring an assault from Washington. Meanwhile, an assortment of CIA operatives are given the thankless task of providing the audience with gobs of exposition about the two leads. It’s soon revealed that one of these operatives may be on the side of the wicked mercenaries, and since the suspects are played by Vera Farmiga, Brendan Gleeson and Sam Shepard, it doesn’t take very long to figure out which one is the bad egg.



Safe House was released on Blu-ray and DVD on June 5, 2012.

Photo credit: Universal Studios Home Entertainment

Far too often, the script by David Guggenheim plays it safe with familiar set-pieces that result in obvious outcomes. Once it's clear that Frost isn't the primary villain, it's only a matter of time before he and Weston develop a mutual respect. Their gradual alliance could've been an interesting one to watch develop, but the film is more interested in staging explosive action than it is in exploring the minds of its characters. Some of the action scenes are spectacular (such as an early car crash), but others (particularly the gun battles) run long enough to numb the senses.

What keeps the film afloat are the performances by Washington and Reynolds. Despite all of the hype built around Frost, he's a throwaway character at best, especially when contrasted with the gravity and substance of a character like Frank Lucas in "American Gangster," or even Alonzo Harris in "Training Day." Yet Washington commits himself completely to the role, illuminating the vulnerability within his ever-calculating mind that remains concealed by layers of impenetrable defense shields. Reynolds is also very good here, suggesting that he may, in fact, be the inverse of Channing Tatum. Whereas Tatum falls flat in dramatic roles but thrives in self-deprecating comedies, Reynolds is infinitely more interesting as a dramatic leading man than as a comedian. His solo work in Rodrigo Cortés' under-appreciated thriller, "Buried," stands as an enduring example of his underutilized potential. A lesser actor would've easily cowered in Washington's shadow, but Reynolds matches his formidable co-star every step of the way. He's enormously sympathetic in his desperate attempt to do the right thing, with all the compromises that might entail.

"Safe House" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 2.40:1 aspect ratio), accompanied by English, French and Spanish audio tracks, and includes a Blu-ray, DVD and digital copy of the film. Universal's interactive viewing option, "Second Screen," is only available as a pocketBLU app, but that's hardly a disappointment since the Blu-ray's gallery of featurettes offers many enticing tidbits. Technical advisor Luis Falcon III used his CIA background to ensure the accuracy of the safe houses' production design. With pictures such as "Outside Love" and "Easy Money" under his belt, Espinosa regards himself as more of a "European art house type," and was attracted to Guggenheim's script because of its central battle between idealism (Weston) and cynicism (Frost). Fight choreographer Olivier Schneider ("The Transporter") dissects his moves in a series of blocking tests, while Washington says that his recent experience onstage in the play "Fences" inspired him to go deeper as an actor. Just how deep did Washington go for this role? He performed the waterboarding scene himself. Now that's dedication.

'Safe House' is released by Universal Studios Home Entertainment and stars Denzel Washington, Ryan Reynolds, Brendan Gleeson, Sam

Shepard, Vera Farmiga, Robert Patrick and Liam Cunningham. It was written by David Guggenheim and directed by Daniel Espinosa. It was released on June 5, 2012. It is rated R.



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