

Blu-ray Review: 'Safe' Consistently Threatens to Become Genuinely Interesting

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- [Blu-ray Review](#) [2]
- [Boaz Yakin](#) [3]
- [Chris Sarandon](#) [4]
- [Death in Love](#) [5]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [6]
- [Jason Statham](#) [7]
- [Lionsgate Home Entertainment](#) [8]
- [Matt Fagerholm](#) [9]
- [Safe](#) [10]
- [The Punisher](#) [11]
- [Theater, TV, DVD & Blu-Ray](#) [12]

CHICAGO – Not to be confused with Todd Haynes's 1995 masterpiece featuring Julianne Moore in the performance of her career, "Safe" is a forgettable would-be blockbuster that puts star Jason Statham through the emotional wringer in order to justify a marathon of repetitive carnage. This is as predictable a star vehicle as one could imagine, yet the direction by Boaz Yakin is so strong that it nearly saves the material.

A sense of palpable tension pervades all 92 minutes of this fast-paced thriller and doesn't end after the final fade-out. It seems like everyone in New York is conspiring to take down the film's two protagonists: a former detective (Statham) and a pint-sized Chinese prodigy (Catherine Chan) kidnapped by thugs intent on exploiting her extraordinary math skills. The first half-hour of the picture is so oppressively doom-laden that it leads the audience to cheer on the bloodletting once it finally arrives.



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

At first, the vengeance-fueled action is spectacularly effective, as an explosive subway brawl leads to a car chase and so on. Yet it doesn't take long for the action to wear out its welcome, and for all the time spent on the film's set-up, Yakin's script never adequately develops his protagonists or the bond that inevitably grows between them. An obvious comparison could be made to "Man on Fire," which did a fine job of building the relationship between Denzel Washington and Dakota Fanning before they were placed in an action set-piece. Chan is merely required to look sorrowful and her line delivery is often flat, though she doesn't have much to work with, considering her character is a walking MacGuffin. Instead of creating a strong central villain, the film assembles an assortment of lowlifes who are brought on for two or three scenes before being disposed of in grand fashion. I especially liked the corrupt mayor (Chris Sarandon) who gives in to the amusing action cliché of repeatedly stating the Statham character's full name, "Luke Wright!" It's not quite as catchy as Jason Bourne or Tobin Frost, but that doesn't stop Sarandon from delivering dialogue like, "Luke Wright is back in the city. My city!"



Safe was released on Blu-ray and DVD on September 4, 2012.

Photo credit: Lionsgate Home Entertainment

I've always considered Statham the least expendable member of that regrettable league known as The Expendables. He projects just the right mixture of gravitas, vulnerability and self-effacing humor in cheerfully disposable larks like "Crank" and the "Transporter" series. In "Safe," he's required to perform the usual gravity-defying stunts while delivering ominously monotone threats to underworld scum. Yet in the film's handful of quiet moments, Statham drops hints that he may, in fact, be a more nuanced and moving actor than he's ever allowed to be onscreen. In those moments, he's just good enough to make the rest of the film suffer in comparison.

"Safe" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 2.35:1 aspect ratio), accompanied by English and Spanish subtitles and is available in a combo pack equipped with a Blu-ray, UltraViolet and digital copy of the film. The featurettes are all reasonably diverting and include some nifty behind-the-scenes footage of stuntmen rolling over moving cars. In his audio commentary track, the director admits that "Safe" was his attempt at making the sort of commercially viable product that got him started in the business (starting with 1989's "The Punisher"). He made it on the heels of an indie passion project, 2008's "Death in Love," and his goal was to make an "impressionistic action film" that allowed Statham the room to "expand within his comfort zone." Yakin's efforts resulted in the exclusion of annoying clichés such as the Perfect Wife Destined to Die. Instead of hiring a model to play Statham's ever-smiling, soon-to-be-murdered wife, Yakin kept her character entirely offscreen. When Statham discovers her corpse, the action unfolds in two prolonged takes while the camera remains fixated on the actor's facial expressions and body language as he crumbles to the floor. It's the most effective scene in the picture and it makes one wish that Statham wasn't so content in playing it safe.

'Safe' is released by Lionsgate Home Entertainment and stars Jason Statham, Catherine Chan, Robert John Burke, James Hong, Anson Mount, Chris Sarandon, Sándor Técsy, Joseph Sikora, Igor Jijikine and Reggie Lee. It was written and directed by Boaz Yakin. It was released on September 4, 2012. It is rated R.

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- [3] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/boaz-yakin>
- [4] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/chris-sarandon>
- [5] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/death-in-love>
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- [9] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/matt-fagerholm>
- [10] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/safe>
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