

Mark Wahlberg's 'Contraband' Steals Half Justice From Icelandic Conquest

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Rating: **2.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – One way to craft an unforgettable, undeniably adept film is to make a new one. Hollywood views that as financially risky, though, and it often doesn't happen without being based on a book with a built-in audience or a film that's already an international box-office success.

Just like the Swedish smash hit "The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo" was recently remade for U.S. audiences by David Fincher of "The Social Network" fame, producer and star Mark Wahlberg found financial worth – and he'd sell you on artistic, too – in the international remake route. He's hoping he'd earn U.S. assurance from what recently worked in Iceland.



Mark Wahlberg stars in "Contraband".

Image credit: Patti Perret, Universal Studios

While U.S. audiences were well aware of Fincher's hijacking from Sweden, "Contraband" being a U.S. remake of Iceland's "Reykjavik-Rotterdam" is lesser known. That film most Americans can't pronounce is one of the biggest-budget Icelandic films of all time and it features an all-star cast of Icelandic cinema. The original film's lead actor, Baltasar Kormákur (a successful director in Iceland), interestingly

took on the role of director for “Contraband”.

“Contraband” couldn’t have had a more predictable plot evolution. Guy (Wahlberg) has a skill (smuggling cool stuff), but he’s sworn no longer to use it because of its ramifications. Smoking-hot wife (Kate Beckinsale) doesn’t approve of said guy’s skill because it doesn’t prove a good role model for the kiddies or mark him as a buttoned-up guy to bring home to mommy. Best friend (Ben Foster) pretends he’s a trusted partner in crime, but shockingly, he’s a double crosser.



Kate Beckinsale stars in “Contraband”.

Image credit: Patti Perret, Universal Studios

And, of course, “Contraband” justifies its “A”-list status because our hero’s said skill is forced to be put to use even though he’s promised to said smoking-hot wife that he’s given it up for good. But it’s OK, folks, because he’s only doing it “one last time” and it’s in earnest since it’s for his smoking-hot wife’s naughty, amateur smuggler brother. We’re made sleepy by this “protagonist must do his dirty work once more to save his family from the bad guys” plot.

Even if that unoriginality is forgiven, “Contraband” has an identity crisis. Are we an entertaining heist film? Are we a boisterous action flick excellent for dotting the mouth with buttery scrumptious popcorn? Are we an unflinching, graphic crime drama? “Contraband” is a wee bit of all three, but not enough of just one. You can tell “Contraband” is writer Aaron Guzikowski’s theatrical debut because he clearly studied the book of everything contrived in Hollywood, imbued all of it in his film and forgot to originate anything novel and intrepid.



Giovanni Ribisi stars in "Contraband".

Image credit: Universal Studios

The film did a few key things right, though, that it should have spent more time doing. It's a common theme of mine to criticize a film's main love duo for its lacking chemistry. It's not believable, you just don't feel it or it's entirely too contrived. Sure, we'd believe that buff boy Wahlberg would bag a classy broad like Beckinsale. A couple kisses throughout the film aren't enough to convince you they're in love rather than merely at work to cash a mammoth paycheck.

But a scene where Beckinsale is literally stuck – in cement, no less – is the first and only tense, emotional moment found in these long 110 minutes. In general, "Contraband" lacks emotion and a person with a normal heart and a typical ability to be evoked can easily float through it like a zombie jacked up on coffee. But despite being contrived, this "husband must urgently save his wife" scene is a double-edged sword. It reminds us of what it's like to feel real emotion from a film, and on the contrary, "Contraband" doesn't inspire us to do it nearly enough.

While Wahlberg and Beckinsale deliver performances you'd expect (and you'll soon forget because they were good without achieving greatness), "Contraband" made two especially adroit casting decisions who leave you with something actually memorable: Ben Foster and Giovanni Ribisi.



Kate Beckinsale (left) and Mark Wahlberg star in "Contraband".
Image credit: Patti Perret, Universal Studios

Foster and Ribisi stand out in almost every film they do and they play supporting roles as hauntingly as anyone in Hollywood these days. Foster earned critical acclaim from 2009's "The Messenger" with Woody Harrelson. His troubled, emotionally distraught, violent roles have continued standing out ever since. Though in "Contraband" Foster is scripted in a good-guy-turned-bad-guy part we could have seen a mile away, he still manages to be the one face on the screen you respect watching most and think most about later.

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But overall, "Contraband" lives up to all the stereotypes you'd expect for a film that's relatively hidden inside a slow, low-expectation January. And the feeling of its release into theaters straight from Hollywood's factory floor is more present than its ability to tug at any of your heartstrings. A film can't just rely on the surefire ingredients a big-budget film needs to become a box-office success. This film did, and because "Contraband" played it too safe and didn't take risks, its surefire bet misfires.

Warning: If motion sickness isn't your bag, this shaky-camera film isn't for you.

"Contraband" stars Mark Wahlberg, Kate Beckinsale, Giovanni Ribisi, Ben Foster, J.K. Simmons, Diego Luna, Robert Wahlberg, Lukas Haas, Jaqueline Fleming, Caleb Landry Jones, William Lucking, Monica Acosta, Michael Beasley, James Rawlings and Connor Hill from director Baltasar Kormákur and writers Aaron Guzikowski and Arnaldur Indriðason. "Contraband," which is rated "R" for violence, pervasive language and brief drug use, has a running time of 110 minutes and opened on Jan. 13, 2012.



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