

Ben Affleck Can't Save Limp 'Runner Runner'

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on October 4, 2013 - 9:03am

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Rating: **2.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Off shore internet gambling sites, tons of money, glorious glamorous women, parties all the time – how the heck can all of that be dull? The new film “Runner Runner” found a way. Ben Affleck phones it in and Justin Timberlake is name recognition window dressing in this limp drama.

“Runner Runner” – the title is a poker term – is pretty choppy, it may have been cut and re-cut to try to revive any life it had in it. For example, Justin Timberlake moves from exiled Princeton student to landing in Costa Rica in about three scenes. Essentially it takes all of its exciting elements and makes it into a same-old-same-old “good vs. evil” story, as if being a mega-rich internet bazillionaire is inherently evil. Isn't he a job creator? There is nothing within the story to recommend it, except maybe the well-lit close ups of Ben, Justin and hubba-hubba Gamma Artherton.

In a strange high concept, Princeton grad student Richie Furst (Justin Timberlake) gets hauled before the a university Dean and warned to stop leading the high-priced students to internet gambling sites – he actually has a job doing that to pay for tuition. Cut off from that income, he naturally decides to take his entire savings and pay high-stakes internet poker to raise more funds. What, was Atlantic City closed?



Richie (Justin Timberlake) Confronts Ivan (Ben Affleck) in 'Runner Runner'
Photo credit: 20th Century Fox

After losing the whole nut, Richie figures out that the paradigms within the internet site were cheating him – again, don't you have homework?

– and gets a plane ticket to Costa Rica to confront the owner of the internet gambling empire, Ivan Block (Ben Affleck). When challenged with the equations, Block is so impressed by the grad student that he hires him. As Richie gets more entrenched into the business machinations – which includes one of Block's partners and old girlfriend Rebecca (Gamma Arterton) – he finds himself within a web of corruption and FBI criminal investigations.

The narrative is like a cat that is either dead or sleeping, but the difference is hard to discern. It propels the characters, but also boxes them in. There is no time for motivations – except money, which is boring – or character development. The plot flies at a rapid pace, in time and setting, so it becomes almost confusing as to why suddenly the FBI is so gung-ho to stop Ivan Block. The only time the government authority will stop a rich man is when a richer man orders them to do so. Come on, he's making fabioazillion dollars.

Justin Timberlake, although admirable as a pop businessman and "Saturday Night Live" goofball, proves again that he doesn't have much range as an actor. As a "good guy" character who loses 16 thousand bucks playing internet poker, he doesn't seem that distraught. He played it too cool, even when the FBI gets involved. There is no rooting interest in Richie, so JT just becomes wallpapering above the title, almost cynically in a way to sell the film. That's the level of performance he gave.

On the evil side, Ben Affleck is back as a leading man type, after winning all the Oscar gold starring and directing as part of an ensemble in "Argo." He is a blank as Block, his character development consisted of letting his beard grow for three days. He seems about as evil as a choir boy, and maybe because Affleck the person is as rich as Block, he can't understand why the persona is being hassled. He can add this paycheck to his collection.



Rebecca (Gamma Arterton) Adds Spice to 'Runner Runner'
Photo credit: 20th Century Fox

The film had a couple of funny lines, including a nice swipe at New Jersey (where Princeton is located), and Gamma Arterton added her ginger spice to a thankless role. She was the only of the cast who tried to understand her motivations, but again it becomes confusing as to what her loyalties are. And despite the evidence that she and Timberlake have the hots for each other, they have zero chemistry as erstwhile lovers.

The film – produced by Leonardo DiCaprio – probably would have been more interesting if the evil internet garbanzoillinaire had bought a member of Congress or a Senator, and had them call J. Edgar Hoover to stop the investigation or Hoover's cross dressing would be exposed – cameo by Leo as Hoover.

"Runner Runner" opens everywhere October 4th. Featuring Ben Affleck, Justin Timberlake, Gamma Arterton and Anthony Mackie. Written by Brian Koppelman and David Levien. Directed by Brad Furman. Rated "R"



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