

FILM REVIEW

When troubled cops cross the thin blue line

The moral compasses of three police officers in 'Brooklyn's Finest' point in different directions, but their destinations are the same: ruination

BY A. O. SCOTT
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

Brooklyn's Finest burrows deep into a rough corner of the Borough of Kings, and also into the collective memory of generations of meaty, emotional movies about New York City cops in trouble. The picture is set in the present, though you might not guess as much from the bad-old-days-level body count and the Sidney Lumet (*Prince of the City*, say, or *Q and A*) aura hanging around the three suffering, ethically compromised policemen at its center.

The director, Antoine Fuqua (*Training Day*), takes a packed, hard-working script by the first-timer (and former New York City transit worker) Michael C. Martin, and paints an infernal triptych of panic, defeat and good intentions gone bad. Sal (Ethan Hawke) is a detective whose money troubles — a houseful of kids, twins on the way, a wife (Lili Taylor) with health problems — lead him twitching and sweating down the path of unrighteousness.

It's likely that Eddie (Richard Gere) has been on that road most of his career, an undistinguished run of flat-footing that's a week away from ending when we meet him. The first morning of that last week on the job, Eddie wakes up, takes a slug of whiskey and sticks a pistol in his mouth. Cowardice — or perhaps laziness — must be what prevents him from pulling the trigger, since he does not behave like a man who has any reason to live.

Following Eddie around as he glumly helps break in a succession of rookies — a situation that is like a depressive send-up of both *Training Day* and Gere's role in Mike Figgis' *Internal Affairs* — you wonder if some kind of redemption might be waiting around the bend. You kind of suspect there might be, which is one sign that *Brooklyn's Finest* is working in familiar genre territory. But it is a testament to Gere's discipline and Fuqua's nimbleness that Eddie's every action seems grounded in a coherent, if contradictory, temperament. Eddie mopes around, keeping company with a prostitute (Shannon Kane) who kindly acts like a lover, his close-set eyes squinting as though he were trying to recall some vague notion of a better, more upstanding life.

The third strand in this sad braid of blue is Tango (Don Cheadle), who has a clearer ethical sense than Sal or Eddie, but whose undercover work assignment places him in just as much moral and physical danger. His ambition and his sense of professional duty conflict with his loyalty to Caz (Wesley Snipes, sly and dapper as ever), a drug dealer who once saved Tango's life.

Mostly, Tango, Sal and Eddie take their separate routes to ruin, occasionally crossing paths without acknowledging one another. But they also exist within a thick, sticky web of relationships and alliances, which is also to say in a hive of effective supporting performances. Kane and Brian

O'Byrne (as Sal's dogged, good-hearted partner) are especially fine, but even players who appear in only a scene or two make a strong impression. Fans of *The Wire* will recognize a few cast members (notably Michael Williams, as one of Caz's underlings), and at its best *Brooklyn's Finest* achieves something like the dramatic density of that series.

Not that the film attains — or, to be fair, really attempts — the kind of novelistic sweep that made *The Wire* so extraordinary. *Brooklyn's Finest*, despite Fuqua's canny use of real locations, mainly in Brownsville, is hardly a work of realism. Rather, like so many of its models (and like *Training Day*), it is a melodrama and a morality play, a study of character under pressure using the brute urban facts of greed, violence and fear for background, mood and stage equipment.

Particular scenes are not always entirely credible, but the sheer charismatic force

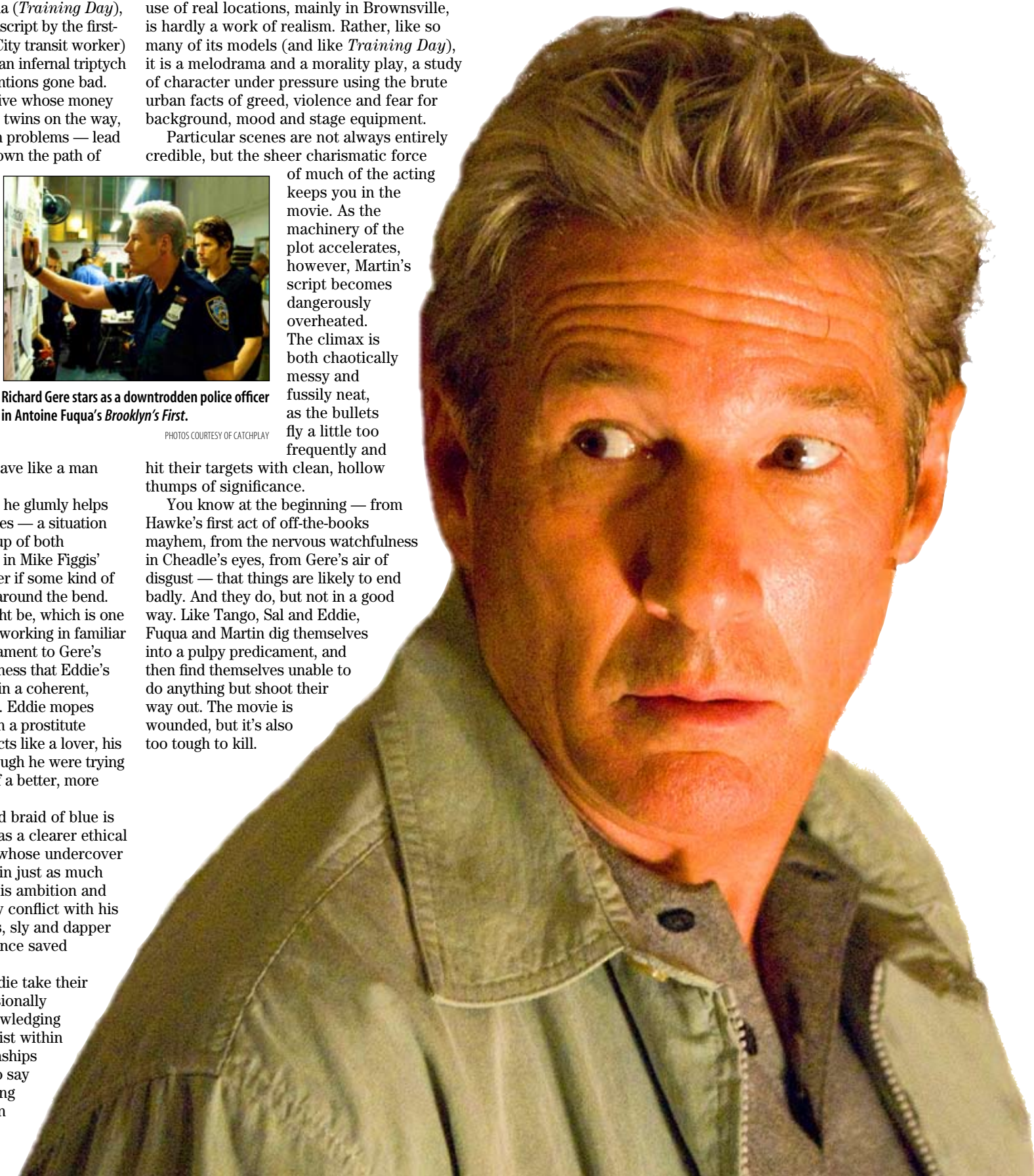
of much of the acting keeps you in the movie. As the machinery of the plot accelerates, however, Martin's script becomes dangerously overheated. The climax is both chaotically messy and fussily neat, as the bullets fly a little too frequently and hit their targets with clean, hollow thumps of significance.

You know at the beginning — from Hawke's first act of off-the-books mayhem, from the nervous watchfulness in Cheadle's eyes, from Gere's air of disgust — that things are likely to end badly. And they do, but not in a good way. Like Tango, Sal and Eddie, Fuqua and Martin dig themselves into a pulpy predicament, and then find themselves unable to do anything but shoot their way out. The movie is wounded, but it's also too tough to kill.



Richard Gere stars as a downtrodden police officer in Antoine Fuqua's *Brooklyn's Finest*.

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Film Notes

BROOKLYN'S FINEST

DIRECTED BY:
ANTOINE FUQUA

STARRING:
RICHARD GERE (EDDIE), DON CHEADLE (TANGO), ETHAN HAWKE (SAL), WESLEY SNIPES (CAZ), JESSE WILLIAMS (EDDIE QUINLAN), WILL PATTON (LIEUTENANT HOBARTS), LILI TAYLOR (ANGELA), SHANNON KANE (CHANTEL), BRIAN O'BYRNE (RONNY ROSARIO), MICHAEL WILLIAMS (RED)

RUNNING TIME:
125 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW

Dreams, a Journey Toward Wan Wan (帶著夢想去旅行)

There is nothing new about blogs turned into books turned into films. Taiwan Internet blogging sensation Wan Wan (彎彎) receives the cinematic treatment in this film by TV director Wang Chuan-tsong (王傳宗). Wan Wan, and the simple line-drawing character than dominates her blog, hit Taiwan's office workers like a tornado back in 2004, providing a cutesy depiction of petty frustrations and dreams for a better life. When hits on her site broke 200 million in 2008, books and films soon followed. *Dreams, a Journey Toward Wan Wan* is a documentary that tells the tale of this strange phenomenon. Check out the Wan Wan Web site at cwwany.com.



Camino

Spanish film inspired by the life and death of Alexia Gonzales (a woman who is currently being considered for sainthood), *Camino* tells the story of a young Catholic woman's struggles with debilitating illness and the effects it has on her deeply pious family, especially her mother, a devout member of the extreme Catholic group Opus Dei. The film picked up a slew of Spanish film awards last year, including the Goya Award in 2009 for Best Film, Best Director, Best Actress and Best Screenplay, but its deep concerns with some of the more bizarre aspects of the Catholic faith may make it play less well in Taiwan. At 143 minutes, *Camino* is likely to prove a grueling experience.



Shrek Forever After

The fourth and, we are promised, final installment of the *Shrek* franchise. Given the poor reviews of *Shrek the Third* (2007), it's just as well that this outing has the added gimmick of 3D to bring in the punters. Unsurprisingly, *Shrek Forever After* has failed to recapture the off-kilter humor of the first two *Shrek* movies. The desperation of the filmmakers is reflected in the high-concept "what if?" story scenario with Shrek finding himself transplanted by the evil Rumpelstiltskin into a world in which he has to become reacquainted with all his old pals. Instead of being fun or exciting, it's all been seen before.



Echoes of the Rainbow (歲月神偷)

Hong Kong movie directed and written by Alex Law (羅啓銳) based on his own childhood and the tragic death of his brother from leukemia. The period detail is said to be very accurate of Hong Kong from 50 years ago, and likely to stir up memories. Strong performances by veterans Simon Yam (任達華) and Sandra Ng (吳君如) as parents of two boys eking out a precarious living as shoemakers and dealing with family tragedy. The pitfalls of a director going straight for the heartstrings have been avoided in Law's careful and sensitive recollection of a Hong Kong very different from the one usually portrayed in cinema.



Gabai Granny 2

A follow-up to 2006's *Gabai Granny* (Saga no Gabai-Baachan), based on a successful novel by Yoshichi Shimada about a young boy growing up poor but happy under the care of his grandmother, a practical and resourceful woman who teaches him many life lessons. This sequel, subtitled "Grandma I Want to Play Baseball," picks up the same set of characters and adds a baseball theme. The main character experiences plenty of laughter and tears in his struggle to make it onto a school baseball team, helped with practical advice and comforting words from grandma.



FILM REVIEW

Back on the trail of a crime and memories long forgotten

A retired investigator reopens a cold case and rekindles an old flame in 'The Secret in Their Eyes,' this year's Oscar winner for best foreign language film

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

An atmospheric and richly layered police procedural written and directed by Argentinian director Juan Jose Campanella is a welcome relief from Hollywood's testosterone-driven take on this genre. The investigation is mixed with hints of an unrealized romance, finely drawn personalities, and a realization of the deep horrors that lie hidden within the human spirit. *The Secret in Their Eyes* won the 2010 Oscar for best foreign language film, beating out recently screened nominees *The White Ribbon* (Das Weisse Band) and *A Prophet* (Un Prophete).

The Secret in Their Eyes (El Secreto de Sus Ojos) starts out with former federal justice agent Benjamin Esposito (Ricardo Darin) revisiting a cold case that has haunted him for years. It is a little more than a whim, though he explains it as a way of filling

out his retirement. In fact, it sucks him right back into events of 20 years ago.

The story mixes Esposito's research for a book he wants to write about the case with flashbacks of the original investigation, and an important theme is that of memory, of how it insinuates itself into our minds, confusing us about the things we thought we knew. Amid the ambiguity of what might actually have happened, director Campanella keeps the story on message, quite a remarkable achievement with such complicated material. Campanella's experience as a director on TV series such as *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* and *House M.D.* shows in the film's tight structure and slick execution, and he manages to pack a huge amount of material into just over two hours. This is crime drama at its best, with the

focus firmly on how people think (what they say and how they act, and the disjunction between the two), rather than on crime, or for that matter, justice.

Esposito's research brings him back into contact with Irene Menendez-Hastings (Soledad Villamil), now a district attorney, but then a newly hired department head trying to establish herself amid the fierce political in-fighting of a corrupt judiciary. In meeting with his former boss, Esposito finds that the spark that existed between him and Hastings has not been totally extinguished, but old barriers of social class and pay grade have been replaced by those of the taint from an investigation that has festered for too many years.

The story is enlivened by the character of Pablo Sandoval (Guillermo Francella), Esposito's clerk, a wily philosopher about human ways and an incorrigible

alcoholic. Sandoval, with his mixture of acute perceptiveness and bumbling incompetence, is one of the great police sidekicks of all time, and plays off wonderfully against Esposito's more polished presence.

While memory plays plenty of tricks on Esposito as he tries to bring the threads of a decades-old case back together again, an unwillingness to forget ravages the soul of Ricardo Morales (Pablo Rago), whose wife was the victim of a savage rape and murder. For Morales, forgiveness is an act of betrayal, though the justice he seeks opens the door to a new kind of horror.

There is a strong subtext about coming to terms with past crimes, not least those of Argentina's various unsavory political regimes, which are hinted at, but kept very much in the background.

The Secret in Their Eyes has



Soledad Villamil, left, and Ricardo Darin star in *The Secret in Their Eyes*.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CATCHPLAY

mastered the difficult art of the slow burn, drawing the audience deeper into the emotions of the people characters, keeping them off balance, and never allowing

them an easy sympathy with "the good guys." Everyone, good and bad, has secrets hidden behind their eyes, if only you could see them.

Film Notes

THE SECRET IN THEIR EYES (EL SECRETO DE SUS OJOS)

DIRECTED BY:
JUAN JOSE CAMPANELLA

STARRING:
SOLEDAD VILLAMIL (IRENE MENENDEZ HASTINGS), RICARDO DARIN (BENJAMIN ESPOSITO), PABLO RAGO (RICARDO MORALES), JAVIER GODINO (ISIDORO GOMEZ),

RUNNING TIME:
127 MINUTES

LANGUAGE:
SPANISH WITH CHINESE SUBTITLES

LANGUAGE: TODAY