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film reviews



Paul Bettany and Harrison Ford in *Firewall*

CYBERNETIC, BUT OFF THE ASSEMBLY LINE

Firewall

review by George Sax

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You don't have to wait long for *Firewall*'s plot to kick in and begin building tension. It wastes little time or effort on introductory placidity or slowly developing menace. Director Richard Loncraine wants to get into it and he makes good use of his keep-it-moving skills. *Firewall*'s pacing and well-knit-together scenes maintain the agitation and suspense without much melodramatic pile-on or techno bang-ups.

It would be a considerable exaggeration to call Loncraine and his film refined or subtle in their achievements, but *Firewall* is, for the most part, an admirably proficient job. And the job description didn't call for refinement or sophisticated indirection. *Firewall* is sub-Hitchcockian in its mood and implications. (And Hitchcock's ideas usually weren't very complex; just a little perverse on occasion.)

Despite the use of what to this digital dunce seems a moderately clever, if perhaps over-complicated, electronics-based plot device, *Firewall* is fundamentally old-fangled, an updated, B-movie throwback.

Harrison Ford is Jack Stanfield, vice-president of security for a small, Seattle-area bank chain. His company is being purchased by a larger banking company and the merger is causing a few flutters and resentments. Jack thinks he's being patronized by the slightly officious new owner (Robert Patrick).

By the time this has been quickly established, the movie's real business is underway: Jack's architect-wife (Virginia Madsen) and their two kids are taken hostage and Jack is coerced into helping the gang leader (a chilly, cruel Paul

Bettany) rob the bank through electronic fund transfers. (The early intercut scenes of Jack at the bank and the invasion of his home are effectively to the point, like much of this film.)

Loncraine usually keeps *Firewall*'s rather basic elements operating together without snags or digressions. (Joe Forte's screenplay is quite workable, as these things go.) These constituent parts are reused—even if unconsciously—from literally countless obscure genre products, and a few higher-toned things, like William Wyler's *The Desperate Hours* from the mid-50s.

Ford, whose screen presence and long-standing relationship with movie audiences the filmmakers have counted on, does his low-key stuff with competence; there's a quiet impressiveness to his carefully controlled performances. He doesn't seem to strain for more marked results. (Except perhaps physically—he may be getting a little superannuated for the movie's rigorous athletic requirements.)

His performance is also a throwback in its way: There are echoes of *Air Force One* and *The Fugitive*. And he's begun to remind me of another Ford, Glenn not Henry. There's a similar sense of sturdy, modulated leading-man strength and purposefulness. Harrison Ford is probably a more broadly gifted performer than the earlier Ford, but Glenn could have filled this role about as well.

This is old-Hollywood, machine-tooled, Dream-Factory stuff. And it works on those reassuringly familiar and vulgarly populist terms. Except for a somewhat bombastically heroic denouement, *Firewall* delivers its goods.

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