

Armored, but not bulletproof

By Hiram Lee
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Armored, directed by Nimród Antal; written by James V. Simpson; produced by Sam Raimi

Armored is a film which has passed through theaters nearly undetected. In many ways a fairly standard genre film about a heist gone wrong, the work does contain some surprises both in its effort to say something about the social misery thrust on the working class by the economic crisis and in its ability to avoid many of the pitfalls which plague so many current films which fall into the action or thriller category. It is not a great film, but there's something to it.

Ty Hackett (Columbus Short) is an Iraq war veteran struggling to find work. Since the death of his parents, he's also taken on the responsibility of caring for his teenage brother. They live together in a modest house that their bank is about to foreclose on. Child services are also threatening to place Ty's brother in foster care.

After a provisional training period, Ty lands a job as a guard with the Eagle Shield armored car company, helping to transport large sums of money in the company's fortified trucks. Among the guard's team are Mike Cochrane (Matt Dillon) a friend of Ty's family, and Baines (Laurence Fishburne) a brash veteran who's always spoiling for a fight and has a fascination with guns.

Cochrane and Baines are plotting a heist. They will steal the \$42 million they've been hired to transport from the Federal Reserve, stash the money in an abandoned steel mill, and tell their bosses they were held up. They will pressure Ty to join them.

At first refusing to take part, Ty finds he can't pass up the opportunity to save his brother and himself by going in on the robbery. On the condition that no one gets hurt, he finally agrees. Viewers will know at once that someone most certainly *will* get hurt and that the heist will go very wrong.

The filmmakers behind *Armored* want to say

something about the conditions millions find themselves faced with today. In their efforts, they aren't always successful or convincing. One often feels something missing in their portrait of working class life, something preventing the viewers from being moved to the extent that we should be by the crises faced by these characters. There is the sense that while the filmmakers may be outraged by the hardships facing workers, they either do not have an intimate knowledge of it themselves or have not been able to work through it in a sufficiently critical way. We never quite feel the weight of it all.

Nimród Antal and his collaborators deserve some credit, however, for exploring these matters at all, and one shouldn't be unduly harsh in criticizing them. As many artists urged on by the developments in the economic crisis begin to enter the territory of social criticism, many will inevitably take their first steps on unsteady feet. Antal has at least turned his eyes in the right direction.

Some of this is done affectingly. Among the more memorable scenes in *Armored* is Ty's confrontation with the social worker threatening to remove his teenage brother from the home. Columbus Short performs the scene with feeling without going overboard or descending into melodrama. The sequence is performed simply enough, but communicates the anguish of the situation with sincerity and compassion.

In another scene, Cochrane tells Ty he should be proud of what he did in Iraq. Ty shakes his head and corrects his friend, "A lot of innocent people died over there." When Cochrane interjects to let him off the hook, saying the young man had only done what was necessary to protect himself and his "brothers" in the US military, Ty says somberly "So you think. That's what you think."

The images that perhaps make the strongest

impression are those of the guards going about their regular duty, retrieving and hauling enormous sums of money from different banks. They nervously escort the money with guns drawn, eyes surveying the streets, fearing danger from all sides. The entire operation has a militaristic character. These sequences suggest something about the nature of the current social order in the US that the filmmakers are perhaps not entirely aware of themselves.

It is also interesting to note that much of the story takes place in a dilapidated abandoned steel mill, a symbol of the collapsed manufacturing industries in the US.

While they clearly have strong feelings on these matters, the filmmakers are more confident handling action sequences. And it's pleasing to see an action film that does not completely rely on special effects. Antal makes good use of suspense throughout his film.

Much of the second half of the work finds Ty locked inside the back of an armored car. He has changed his mind about the heist and his co-conspirators turn on him. He takes shelter from them, shutting himself up in the supposedly impenetrable car which has been wrecked and can no longer operate. The other men, now intending to kill him, begin the long drawn out effort of breaking in. A constant, unnerving thump runs throughout the soundtrack as the guards strike at the hinges of the rear door attempting to break them open. It's an engaging device. Whatever its weaknesses, the viewer never loses interest in this film.

Armored is a relatively minor work when all is said and done, and it's never as penetrating as one would like. It can be frustrating seeing the potential of the material going unfulfilled. The film is ultimately more interesting than riveting and more well-meaning than well-executed in its handling of social questions. As good as it may be in parts, one leaves the theater with mixed feelings. Part of the story has been told, but not all of it. What does all of this *really* look like? How does it *really* feel? *Armored* never quite comes up with the answers.

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