

Dead Bang ★

Year of Release: 1989

Review by Randy Parker

Country: USA

Verdict: Skip It

Dead Bang, an action thriller starring Don Johnson, lives up to its dumb title, or at least to half of it. Although *Dead Bang* is definitely dead, it's anything but a bang; in fact, they should have called this one "Dead Bore."

In the film, Johnson plays ... you guessed it ... a cop. The role must have been really challenging for Johnson since his character, Jerry Beck, is a gritty Los Angeles homicide detective, a real stretch from the slick vice detective Johnson portrayed on "Miami Vice." A la Mel Gibson in *Lethal Weapon*, Beck is an emotional wreck, complete with violent outbursts, unscrupulous police methods, and a bleak outlook on life. Beck's wife has just divorced him, and she is cutting him off from their children. She will not even allow him to wish them "Merry Christmas" by telephone. But Beck's family and emotional problems take a back seat to the action and thrills in *Dead Bang*. Beck is investigating the brutal murders of a shopkeeper and a cop. His investigation starts in L.A. and finally culminates and climaxes in Oklahoma, where he has a violent showdown with the killers at a white supremacist camp.

Virtually every aspect of *Dead Bang* is inept and ineffective. The plot is incoherent and full of holes. The movie depicts Beck's investigation so clumsily that you never see the connections between the clues and his conclusions. The action sequences in *Dead Bang* are strictly third-rate, and the movie has absolutely no momentum or suspense. I certainly expected more from long-time director John Frankenheimer who directed the classic political thriller, *The Manchurian Candidate*—as well as *Black Sunday*, *Seven Days In May*, and *The French Connection II*. In all fairness to Frankenheimer, however, I should note that most of *Dead Bang*'s shortcomings seem to stem from its shabby script rather than from the direction.

Dead Bang tries to don a mask of social relevance by incorporating themes of racism and white su-

premacy, but its efforts are nothing more than token gestures and nothing less than insulting. According to the movie's production notes, *Dead Bang* is based on the real-life experiences of still-active detective Jerry Beck. You would never guess this from watching *Dead Bang*, however, since the film totally lacks credibility; it is utterly unconvincing and unbelievable.

Most of the characters in *Dead Bang* are atrociously acted, underdeveloped, superfluous, or all of the above. William Forsythe, for example, is painfully bad as Arthur Kressler, a wholesome by-the-book FBI agent who's offended by Beck's foul language and unorthodox methods. Forsythe's lame performance and corny dialogue makes his character unbearable. *Dead Bang* marks the motion picture debut of Tim Reid ("WKRP In Cincinnati" and "Frank's Place"), but his talents are completely wasted in a clichéd and contrived role; he plays the chief officer of a squadron of black cops who help Beck to nail the villains. The sole function of Penelope Ann Miller's character is to give *Dead Bang* an excuse to include a gratuitous love scene between characters about whom you couldn't care less. I guess the film's title refers to this love scene since it's definitely a dead bang.

The only real virtue of *Dead Bang*, believe it or not, is Johnson, who tries to overcome the limitations of the movie's pitiful script. Johnson succeeds in giving his character a sarcastic sense of humor and a hint of depth, and his pessimistic wisecracks occasionally bring the film to life. And I must admit that *Dead Bang* does have one or two amusing moments. One involves a psychological examination of Beck, in which he can't keep a straight face because the psychiatrist resembles Woody Allen. The funniest scene has Johnson throwing-up all over a criminal as he interrogates him. But when barf is the highlight of a movie, you know the movie's in trouble.