

An Innocent Man ★★½

Year of Release: 1989

Review by Randy Parker

Country: USA

Verdict: See It

An Innocent Man is not a great film; in fact, I'm about to criticize the hell out of it. But the funny thing is, the movie left me satisfied. Although it is sometimes laughably unbelievable, *An Innocent Man* packs a powerful emotional punch.

Tom Selleck plays Jimmie Rainwood, an airline mechanic who's wrongfully sent to prison for three years when two dirty vice cops frame him. David Rasche and Richard Young play the corrupt detectives as kind of a Crockett and Tubbs gone haywire. They're so sleazy they give dirt a bad name.

While Jimmie serves his time behind bars, he has to abandon everything he's ever known and conform to a prison society where it's kill or be killed. The movie depicts prison life with all the usual clichés: uptight guards, racial tensions, beatings, and murders. Nothing new here—just recycled material from countless other prison movies.

Jimmie Rainwood is Selleck's most challenging film role to date, one which calls for much more than just making googly-eyes at a baby. Unfortunately, Selleck isn't quite up to the task; he's somewhat stiff. He gets the surface gestures right, but he never digs deep enough to reveal Jimmie's underlying rage and vulnerability. However, Selleck does have enough charisma to get by in the role. Jimmie seems like a decent man, and we feel sorry for him.

Unlike Selleck, who's in over his head, F. Murray Abraham is in his element. He is dazzling as the seasoned inmate who takes Rainwood under his wing and shows him the ropes, teaching him how to survive prison politics. Abraham is good enough to make you forget he's playing a stock character. Newcomer Laila Robins plays Jimmie's loyal wife Kate, who tirelessly works to prove her husband's innocence while he's incarcerated. Robins is effective in the role. Even when her lines sound artificial, her emotions come across as sin-

cere.

Selleck, Robins, and the rest of the cast get little help from ex-convict Larry Brothers who wrote the script. Apparently, Brothers dropped out of college in the '60s to pursue his main interests: drugs and crime. Eventually, he wound up in Los Angeles and began working in the film industry. The screenwriting classes in prison must not be so great because Brothers' dialogue is often unbearably phony. For instance, Robins has to deliver this classic line: "I'm not a theory! I'm a real human being, and so is Jimmie!" And try this one on for size: Jimmie and Kate are about to have sex for the first time in three years...

Kate: "We have all the time in the world."

Jimmie: "You're the best!"

If you think the dialogue is bad, wait until you hear the gushing musical score; you could pour it over pancakes.

The saving grace of *An Innocent Man* is its emotional charge and dramatic intensity. The movie is superficial in many respects, but it pushes all the right buttons to arouse our emotions. We're infuriated by the two arrogant cops who think they're untouchable. We're distressed by the actions Jimmie is forced to take while he's in prison. Selleck and Robins are a little too cutesy as husband and wife, but there is a genuinely moving tenderness between them. The scene in which she first visits him in prison is heartbreaking; at least, I had a lump in my throat.

Director Peter Yates shot *An Innocent Man* on location in two prisons and used actual inmates as extras. The bleak locations and tough convicts give the film a sense of gritty reality, which helps to distract us from the weaknesses of the script. It's a close call, but I think the good in *An Innocent Man* outweighs the bad.