

Year of Release: 1990

Review by Randy Parker

Country: USA**Verdict:** See It

Director Sydney Lumet has made dozens of exceptional films over the years; his last film, *Family Business*, was not one of them. The limp caper comedy was altogether forgettable, especially in comparison to Lumet's prior film, the gut-wrenching drama *Running On Empty*. But one mark of a great filmmaker is the ability to bounce back from a misfire like *Family Business* with a bulls-eye like *Q & A*.

In *Q & A*, Lumet offers a powerful and provocative look at New York City's police force and judicial system; it's not a pretty sight. The film (based on the book by New York State Supreme Court Justice and former D.A. Edwin Torres) exposes the city's ugly underbelly—the dirty cops, the cheesy lawyers, and above all, the racist “old boy” network. In some respects, the movie is a routine story of police corruption. But in other respects, it's a bold and fiery outcry against racism, as incendiary and infuriating as *Do the Right Thing* or *Mississippi Burning*.

The film features Nick Nolte in his tough-guy mode, playing a hot-shot detective on the N.Y.P.D. who is rotten to the core. The movie begins in a dark alley with Nolte blowing a guy's brains out for no apparent reason and then claiming it was in self-defense. Timothy Hutton plays the young, idealistic assistant D.A. assigned to investigate the shooting.

Hutton's superior (Patrick O'Neal) assures him that the case is cut and dried, a clear instance of self-defense. But Hutton realizes that there's something rotten in the state of New York when witnesses start giving conflicting testimonies in the *Q & A* (the official record of what happened). The key witness is a drug lord (Armand Assante) who's married to Hutton's ex-girlfriend, played by Jenny Lumet (the director's daughter). *Q & A* seethes with suspense and reeks of impending doom as Hutton's investigation takes him further and further in over his head. The inexperienced D.A. stumbles upon a gigantic white supremacist conspiracy in which Nolte is only a minor player.

Like *Do The Right Thing* and *Mississippi Burning*, *Q & A* is as apt to stimulate your mind as it is to arouse your emotions. Few films depict raw racial hostility so openly or so potently. The relationships between the characters in *Q & A* are complex and uneasy, sometimes explosive; there's an undercurrent of animosity which always threatens to

bubble over. Even the two detectives who are assisting Hutton barely get along; one is black (Charles Dutton) and the other Puerto Rican (Luis Guzman)—an ethnic division which ignites conflict between them. *Q & A* measures up admirably against *Do the Right Thing* and *Mississippi Burning*. The characters seem more credible than those in Spike Lee's troubling film, and Lumet avoids the sensationalism which tainted Alan Parker's controversial movie.

Q & A never loosens its powerful stranglehold over you, thanks to vital performances, which remain steady even when Lumet's script starts to wobble. Nolte, in particular, stands out, both literally and figuratively. Nolte tends to play either lovable lunks (*Down and Out in Beverly Hills*) or gruff ruffians (*Extreme Prejudice*). In *Q & A*, he is the epitome of nastiness: vulgar, violent, bigoted, and as dirty as they come. The detective's twisted, racist values have sent him straight over the edge and turned him into a monster. At the same time, however, the corrupt cop has a seductive charm about him. Nolte is unrestrained in a truly riveting performance.

In the central role, Hutton also stands tall. Every time I see Hutton, he surprises me. He looks lightweight, but he is actually a fine dramatic actor. Unlike Michael J. Fox, Hutton has dramatic conviction to back up his soft, pretty-boy looks. Hutton always gives you the feeling that the wheels are turning behind his baby blue eyes. He would have done well with Fox's role in *Casualties of War*.

The supporting actors in the film carry their weight and then some. Assante, as the drug dealer looking to go straight, and Jenny Lumet, as his wife, are to the human eye what magnets are to metal. Fyvush Finkel has minimal screen time, but he warrants mention for his two priceless appearances as Preston Pearlstein, a low-life lawyer.

Q & A is far from perfect. The film has a hopelessly complicated story line which expects you to keep track of just too many names. You often have to strain to keep up with all the twists and turns. Furthermore, Lumet embeds these intriguing characters into a plot which is all too familiar to anyone who regularly watched “Miami Vice.”

To his credit, however, Lumet doesn't offer any easy answers to the problems he raises in the film, and unlike most screenwriters, he avoids a conventional ending as if it were the plague. Lumet

clearly is not afraid to leave plot strands dangling and loose ends hanging. The movie may end, but life goes on—with not everyone living happily

ever after. *Q & A* is a sophisticated drama from a filmmaker still very much in his prime.

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