Mitch brings us into the holiday with his latest movie review, this one of the new James Bond movie "Casino Royale". It's been getting great reviews nationally, but what did our very own Mitch Cyrus think of it? If you haven't been checking out Mitch's movie reviews - this just in - they're very good. Click on his name for his entire archive.

"Rebooting a franchise". That is the phrase that was invented last year when Christopher Nolan rescued the all-but-dead "Batman" franchise, starting from the beginning of the legend of the Dark Knight in creating one of the best movies of the year in "Batman Begins". Earlier this summer, Bryan Singer also attempted to reboot a franchise, and found generally positive (albeit slightly lukewarm) reviews for "Superman Returns". And now the most venerable of the three movie icons, James Bond, 007, goes for the reboot with the first "Blonde Bond" inheriting the tuxedo.

And it works, possibly just as well as the Batman flick. Martin Campbell, the man behind the camera when Pierce Brosnan gave the franchise a lift from the Timothy Dalton doldrums in his first Bond feature "Goldeneye", gives Daniel Craig the same expert guidance as he takes his first spin in the Aston-Martin.

But the gimmicks and silliness are gone. In its place is a much leaner, dirtier, and nastier Bond. The excessive coyness and smugness that has been seen since the Roger Moore days have evaporated, but I won't say "never to return". This story concerns the very start of the Bond legend, beginning just before he obtains his Double-O status. Subtlety and smoothness are unnecessary traits for the younger Bond, and Craig gives us steely blank stares without a touch of mirth, along with cold blooded action. He is, in the words of his supervisor, mentor, antagonist, and possibly friend "M" (Judi Dench), a "blunt instrument", one to be used for killing,

nothing more.

Of course, that changes as she needs Bond, MI6's best poker player, to play in a high stakes poker game against "The Banker of the Terrorists", Le Chiffre. It seems Bond derailed his plans to "invest" some of the terrorists' money in a scheme to sabotage an airline, allowing him to make millions on short selling its stock. Now the bad guys want their money back, and Le Chiffre plans to do so by winning the $150 million prize. In one note to the modernization of the franchise, they are not playing baccarat or five-card draw, but the now extremely popular game of Texas Hold-em.

No Bond movie, despite the revisions, could be complete without unbelievable stunts, wild chase scenes, exotic scenery and beautiful women. "Casino Royale" delivers the goods in those departments as well. While we don't get the over the top theatrics involving ski slope gun battles, airplanes off cliffs, or helicopters dropping bad guys in their wheel chairs into smokestacks that are normally shown before the opening credits roll, we do get an exhilarating chase scene early on through a construction site in Madagascar. I'm not sure if Craig was chasing a terrorist bomb maker, a world class gymnast, or Spider-Man, but I was hooked for the entire duration.

There was no disappointment with the Bond Girls either. Caterina Murino appears early as the wife of a terrorist Bond is tracking in the Bahamas. In a role reversal from Ursula Anders in "Dr. No", and Halle Berry in "Die Another Day", this time it's Bond coming out of the water in a tight fitting bathing suit, catching the eye of the Italian beauty. Later on, Bond is assigned an accountant to accompany him to Casino Royale to watch over the Crown's $10 million stake in the poker game. Naturally, this accountant is drop-dead gorgeous, in the form of French actress Eva Green's Vesper Lynd. But instead of the normal routine of "Bond flirts shamelessly and the girl swoons", we get something else; two people who verbally size each other up immediately and mercilessly strip away any pretensions they have. In doing so, we also get some background (possibly) about Bond's background and upbringing, none of which I'll spoil here.

While it is extremely important to have all the Bond trappings, a good director, and a good script to make one of these movies work, the single most important issue must be the quality of the actor. In this case, Daniel Craig is simply the best Bond since Sean Connery, and in time has a chance to exceed him (yeah…I'm spouting blasphemy to most people…but give it time). His James Bond starts out as the roughest of diamonds, raw and unpolished. His 007 has the skills, intelligence, and ruthlessness needed, but he does possess an enormous ego that must be reigned in. Craig does an exceptional job in taking Bond through the metamorphosis, while

showing us other facets of his character that show him to be much more human than we've ever known. We know from all the other movies that Bond is almost a Super-hero himself. He always gets his man, he always gets the girl, and he's always cool, aloof, and sarcastic. Craig is none of those things, tightly wound and looking almost uncomfortable at times in a tux or behind the wheel of an expensive car. It is a masterful performance by a man who has immediately made the character completely his own.

Craig and director Campbell show you the man behind the myth, and you enjoy the fact that this movie is a lot more cerebral than any recent Bond film. The central part of the movie involves very little wild action, focusing instead on the card game and the intellectual interaction of the two protagonists and the peripheral players. Even the inevitable scenes where Bond is in danger and must make a dramatic escape defy convention.

That is the beauty of this film. We get numerous glimpses into the origins of aspects of Bond that we love. The martini, the tuxedo, and the Aston-Martin among other things are all set up wonderfully. But then there are also numerous clichés normally expected in these films that are totally turned on their heads, and both the old and the new combine in perfect harmony to give us one of the best Bond movies ever made. No, it's not High Art that will be threatening to walk off with Oscar's Best Picture award, but it is an excellent piece of Holiday entertainment, and a welcome return of The Man, The Myth, and The Legend that is 007.

My rating: Brian Sipe (3 ½ footballs).