Having just gotten back into the swing of reviewing films after a few weeks break, Mitch had a choice of a couple of movies that had been getting great press since their release. One was the latest Pixar animation film to astound audiences; "Up". The other was the surprise breakout hit of the summer; "The Hangover". Instead, he chose to go with the new release, "The Taking of Pelham 1 2 3", thinking he could really use a good adult drama, instead of a "kids show" or a raunchy comedy. He gives us his thoughts on the film in his latest movie review for us here at TCF.

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My logic may have been correct, as I still probably could use a good adult drama, but for that, it looks like I'll have to hold on another two weeks for "Public

Enemies", as "Pelham" was close to a total waste of my time.

The potential was there. Director Tony Scott and Denzel Washington have a good track record when they work together, as they did in "Crimson Tide", "Man on Fire", and "Déjà vu". Now what I should have recognized there was a pattern of each subsequent movie being slightly worse than the one before, but I went in anyway, and was completely dumbfounded on how badly Scott blew this one.

To start with; why remake such a classic 70s caper film? "The Taking of Pelham One Two Three" was a brilliant, if under-appreciated, bit of cinematic history back when it premiered in 1974. Starring Walter Matthau as a Transit Authority Police detective, and Robert Shaw as the leader of the hijackers, it was a tense thriller that stood up well to two other gritty New York City crime movies of the era; "Serpico" and "The French Connection".

Scott's re-images the film as if he were directing a music video, relying on quick cuts, loud music, whirling camera angles, and car crashes in place of the psychological drama that took place in the original between Matthau's Lt. Garber, and Shaw's mysterious "Mr. Blue" (in the original, the gang members referred to each other using colors for names...which impressed Quentin Tarantino so much that he used the bit for "Reservoir Dogs").

He changes Garber (Washington) as well, making him a former executive in the MTA, who is spending time as a conductor while he is under investigation for accepting a bribe. Garber is on-duty when the criminals, led by John Travolta, takes over the train, stopping it at a point where they don't have radio contact other than the microphones (it's never explained why that was desired, as the crooks set up their own internet router in the tunnel), and at the top of a hill in the tunnels where they can see people coming. Ryder, as Travolta's character calls himself, demands $10 million within an hour, or he says he will start executing one of the 19 hostages every minute.

The rest of the movie is the cat-n-mouse game between Ryder and Garber. For some reason, Ryder wishes to negotiate through Garber, relegating the NYPD negotiator, played by John Turturo, to the background. I will at least give some credit here, as I was worried right from the first time that I saw him that Lt. Camonetti would be typecast into the normal bureaucratic bungler that Turturo usually plays. Luckily, that is not the case. I also thought they did an OK job with James Gandolfini as the mayor of New York. He certainly wasn't Tony Soprano in this, but he didn't go too far over into the stereotypical slimy politician either, and as with Turturo, it was a solid supporting performance.

However, the performances of the bit players couldn't compensate for the weak performance from Washington, and the absolute horrid acting of Travolta. To start with, Washington's character was almost identical to the role he played in "Inside Man"...a decent man trying to negotiate his way through a crisis while under investigation for wrong-doing. But when Washington played Det. Keith Frazier in that Spike Lee film, he was allowed to show his natural charm and charisma. In "Pelham", he is older, bloated, and almost sedate. I understand what Scott was trying to do in making him this way for most of the movie; to set up the contrast when he finally stopped acting beaten down, and took matters into his own hands. It was a decision that failed, however...mostly due to the fact that Garber's actions over the last 30 minutes of the film were completely unrealistic and unbelievable.

Even more unbelievable was John Travolta's histrionics as Ryder. I personally do not understand why Hollywood directors continue to cast Travolta as a deranged lunatic, because he sucks at it. "The Punisher", "Swordfish", "Broken Arrow", "Face/Off" (during the scenes when he was the bad guy)...they were all the same; a megalomaniacal killer whose only reaction to anything is to scream or shoot people. The man has all the subtlety in these roles as Shaquille O'Neal shows at the free throw line. You get no real insight into Ryder, and therefore no sympathy into his character. That would still be fine if you have a charismatic actor playing a charismatic character; think of Alan Rickman as Hans Gruber in "Die Hard", Jack Nicholson as Costello in "The Departed", or Gene Hackman as Little Bill in "Unforgiven". Travolta is obviously not in the class of any of those three, and when you combine Washington's subdued Garber with Travolta's

uninspiring Ryder, the result is a movie that you simply don't care that much about.

Putting the final touches of mediocrity on this film is a script that completely lacks one ounce of originality. I know this is a remake, but couldn't they try to put ONE unique scene or plot device in this movie? There wasn't a single scene that hasn't been shown a thousand times before; car chases ending in an inconvenient accident, obnoxious supervisors, over-enthusiastic sadistic side-kicks to the villain, ulterior motives, secret escapes, spunky little kids in danger, etc, etc, etc. Every "twist" is predictable; every hostage is a stereotype; and every motive is telegraphed long before they are "revealed".

In doing some research on IMDB about this film, I see that Tony Scott will be at it again, as he is set to film a remake of the kitsch-classic Walter Hill fable "The Warriors", setting it this time in Los Angeles. I am cringing already.

For this film? Forget it, and order the original on Netflix.

My Rating: Mike Phipps (1/2 football). We gave away Paul Warfield for THIS? level of suck.