Ben Affleck completes a most unlikely career resurrection as the director, co-screenwriter, and star of the gritty heist thriller “The Town”, a riveting character driven cops and robbers film that proves Affleck was no one-hit wonder behind the camera after his brilliant directing debut with “Gone Baby Gone”.

Affleck is a bit more ambitious in his second effort. While his brother Casey carried the acting weight of the first film, Ben chooses this time to take the lead role himself, playing in essence a version of the Bostonian working class schlub he portrayed in “Good Will Hunting”. Here he plays Doug MacRay, a Charlestown criminal who **almost** made it out of the environment he was born into. Growing up with a single father who was a bank robber, you would have expected nothing less, but Doug was a talented hockey player who was drafted in the NHL. Alas, his career never took off, and instead of using the opportunities sports gave him to break away, he fell right back in with the same old crowd.

Similar to “Good Will Hunting”, which Affleck also co-wrote, it is all about the close group of friends one hangs with when it comes to living life in Boston, but this group is a lot more dangerous than the Southies led by Matt Damon in the other film. Here, his number one friend is the highly strung Jimmy Coughlin (Jeremy Renner), a sociopath of the first degree, and

definitely a bad influence on Doug. Worst yet is that he is the brother of Doug's sometimes girl-friend Krista (Blake Lively), an oxycontin addicted single mother.

Doug's major skill is in organizing and carrying out daring bank robberies with Jimmy and two other friends; a wheel man and an electronics expert. At the opening of the film, they rob a local bank, with Jimmy brutally beating the bank manager, and taking the assistant manager (Rebecca Hall) hostage, against Doug's wishes. They later release Claire, but Jimmy is concerned that she may be able to identify them. To avoid bloodshed, Doug agrees to track her to see what she knows.

This is where the movie shifts gears from the standard heist movie. Totally unexpectedly, Doug starts to fall for Claire. At first, he just plays off her frayed emotions to learn what he needs, but as they continue to go out, he is captivated by this young woman's resolve, intelligence, and compassion, almost shocked that she is not bothered by his lower class status.

Of course, Doug doesn't tell her about his "real" job, nor that his father is serving a life sentence for murder in the commission of a robbery. It is the type of deception that is done out of caring for her feelings, but one that you know cannot last. Not with Jimmy demanding that they pull more jobs, which gets them closer to being discovered by the FBI, led by the dogged Special Agent Frawley (Jon Hamm).

As much as I've outlined the plot here, it in no way can really describe the intricacies of the movie. The script crackles with tension, ingenuity and wit, rarely falling into hackneyed clichés. At times it may seem formulaic, just due to the nature of the genre, but this one is very different in one major way as far as I am concerned: You really don't know who to "root for". In most heist movies, you are manipulated from the start to either identifying with the cops or the robbers. In "The Town", it's not quite that simple. You really do want Doug to find his way out of the lifestyle that he is trying so desperately to escape, but you can't quite be pulling for him to succeed with his robbery attempts, and he is certainly no angel. At the same time, the cops are shown as trustworthy and hard working, but they are the secondary characters; so you aren't necessarily cheering when they find success either.

To pull off this kind of balancing act, all the actors must excel, and they certainly do in this film.

Affleck has shown over his last few films that he is much more than the pretty boy from the bomb “Daredevil”. It started with him playing up his good looks in shady characters in “Hollywoodland” and “State of Play”. Now he gets to do something he hasn’t done well since “Good Will Hunting”, play up his Bostonian grit. Affleck is totally believable in the action scenes, in the intense drama scenes with Jimmy, and in the more tender moments with Claire. He is helped in this regard by the performance of Rebecca Hall in the role. Claire could so easily be shown as just a whiny victim, given the storyline. Hall reaches beyond that and gives Claire the perfect combination of frailty and strength; resolve and hopelessness, all the while allowing her to shine through with the optimism that she is coming through this all, and the crushing devastation once reality sets in.

Jon Hamm is also very impressive as Agent Frawley, as he manages to step completely away from his role of Don Draper in “Mad Men”; no easy task. He has the confidence and leadership that we’ve come to see in the “Mad Men” character, but none of the calm smugness. Hamm truly makes Frawley a character all to himself, even through the limited screen time as the majority of the movie focuses on the criminals.

Taking complete advantage of that focus is Jeremy Renner, showing his accolades from last year for “The Hurt Locker” was no fluke. Jimmy Coughlin is one of the nastiest gangsters I’ve seen since James Cagney in “White Heat”, and Renner astounds as the volatile, immoral side-kick. With his pitch-perfect Boston accent, nervous twitches, and snarly attitude, Renner is like a cobra every time you see him; you never know when he is going to strike with deadly force, and the undercurrent of impending violence permeates every scene he is in.

I was even impressed with Blake Lively, who was not someone I’d ever consider an actual actress. But I was wrong, as she was nearly unrecognizable as the skanky, but still somewhat sympathetically pathetic Krista.

Overall, the acting and directing more than made up for a few weeks spots in the script that I chalk up to necessary evils due to the nature of these kinds of gangster-type films, with almost all of the credit going directly or indirectly to Affleck.

He may have invented himself a nice little cottage industry here; character studies of the dirty older neighborhoods of Boston. And if they can keep on being as good as “Gone Baby Gone” and “The Town”, I’m all for seeing Affleck continue down this road.

My Rating: Brian Sipe (3 ½ footballs)