

MOVIES

De Palma's 'Snake Eyes' worthy of praise

BY JON KATZ
SPECIAL WRITER

Nicholas Cage fans, be patient; we'll get to him in a moment. "Snake Eyes," a suspense thriller that starts over the speed limit, and doesn't slow down until you're halfway home, is Brian De Palma's to praise.

The versatile, veteran director's resume includes "Carrie," "Dressed to Kill" and "Body Double" in the same genre, as well as "Mission: Impossible" and "The Untouchables." With "Snake Eyes," De Palma has taken the DNA of 40's B-movies and created a whole new high-tech species of suspense. It's more than cloning; "Snake Eyes" is "The

Maltese Falcon" on steroids. Set in an Atlantic City hotel-casino, Nicholas Cage is Rick Santoro, a corrupt police detective which, we're advised, is indeed redundant. In an opening sequence which will be dissected in film schools alongside that of "Citizen Kane," De Palma's steadiest follows, leads and enforces Santoro from the Boardwalk to his ring-side seat of a heavyweight title match. It's a continuous 13-minute shot that required incredible choreography of actors and equipment.

And in that uncut scene, Santoro is reunited with old enemy Kevin Dunne (Gary Sinise), a navy commander assigned to protect the Secretary of Defense.

When Dunne is drawn away from his post by one mystery woman, while another sits down next to the Secretary, the champ is apparently knocked into next week and rifle shots ring out. The Secretary is hit, and Santoro looks around at the 14,000 fleeing suspects.

A series of flashbacks, each with innovative filmmaking, replays the events leading up to the assassination from the viewpoints of three witnesses: Dunne, Julia Costello (Carla Gugino), the woman who spoke to the Secretary just before he was shot, only to run from the scene, and heavyweight champion Lincoln Tyler (Stan Shaw) whose loss comes under scrutiny of the pay-

per-view cameras.

As the individual stories unravel while simultaneously becoming intertwined, Santoro knows he's taken on a lot more than his cop's best prepared him for, and must choose allegiance between the old friend and the beautiful woman who lost her glasses in the fracas but never squints. A no-brainer, you say? Well, maybe.

Fresh from "City of Angels," in which he did little more than look ethereal, Cage chews the scenery with relish as the loud, on-the-take and on-the-make Santoro. When he's reminded that Atlantic City has turned from a high-class resort into a sewer, he responds "Yeah, but it's my sewer." In his tacky Hawaiian shirt, Cage is a fun guy to follow as he puts the pieces together. De Palma allows us to stay only a half-step ahead of the detective, so we root him on from the dark while wondering if we, ourselves, are on the right track.

Sinise (ever-identified as Forrest Gump's Lt. Dan), is revealed soon enough as more than just the victim of a redhead's ample cleavage. From there, he turns into the intense pursuer, like the unstoppable robot in "Terminator 2," he just keeps coming, and so much for anyone who gets in his way.

Gugino (TV's "Spin City"), turns in a multi-hued performance as a missile specialist for the Trump-like defense contractor, but she scores more points as an innocent than as a faux hooker. Stan Shaw ("Fried Green Tomatoes") plays a boxer on screen for the third time, and



Suspense thriller: Detective Rick Santoro (Nicholas Cage, left) discusses the investigation into the murder of the U.S. Secretary of Defense with Navy Commander Kevin Dunne (Gary Sinise) in "Snake Eyes."

makes us feel each blow of this and every other fight his Lincoln Tyler has ever had.

"Snake Eyes" moves at the pace of a crowded crap game on Saturday night, with just as many ways for its players to lose. Don't be late for that opening sequence, and stay for the slow zoom-in during the final credits, it makes for good speculation on the way out.

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