

## *Payback* (1999)

Directed and written by Brian Helgeland

This is a movie that has nothing to say. Mel Gibson plays Porter, supposedly the “bad guy” in this movie, and I think he is, in ways that were unintended. The fact that he makes his living as a robber doesn’t immediately mean that he’s “bad”. Bank robbers have been romanticized since movies began. And his score in this movie is from some Chinese gangsters – nobody normally defined as innocent is going to get hurt. The director, Brian Helgeland, tries to establish the “badness” of the Gibson character early in a series of disconnected scenes where he not only leaves a two-cent tip for a waitress but steals some of her tip money, and then robs a supposed cripple on the street (who gets up to chase him). But this is all the most obvious kind of window dressing. How bad is he? He has been set up and shot by his junkie wife, Lynn (Deborah Unger) and best friend Val (Gregg Henry) and is now on the come-back and pay-back trail. When he finds Lynn strung out, his revenge amounts to solicitous protection. He ushers her into bed (alone), takes away her smack, and tries to help her get clean.

As we learn in the inevitable flashback, Gibson was set up by Val and Lynn to score what he thinks is a quarter million from a Chinese triad. After netting the cash and discovering it’s only \$140,000 – and putting in a plug for mandatory seatbelts – Gibson is gunned down by Val and Lynn (who was angry about a two-timing photo of Porter and another blond, Rosie, played by Maria Bello). Val takes the cash and uses 130 grand to pay off his debt to the “outfit”, buying his way into the inner circle. It didn’t take much. The price of everything is cheap here. His big mistake was not to have finished off Porter. Gibson chases his \$70,000 to the top of the organization, piling up dead bodies, and sicking Internal Affairs on the crooked cops, who planned to steal the money. In the end, Gibson outsmarts the head of the outfit, Bronson (Kris Kristofferson), nets the full amount, and escapes to Canada with Rosie, Lynn having conveniently died of an overdose compliments of Val.

Porter confides to us that what he learned from the double-cross was that his life was worth \$70,000. No one else in the movie can believe that he goes to such lengths to recover this paltry sum. Dividing the seventy grand by the corpses he leaves behind, a life is worth a lot less.

It’s in his payback mission that Gibson comes across as really evil and not as just bad. At one point in the pursuit of “his” money, Gibson confronts Carter (William Devane), one of the two “lieutenants” in the outfit. He kills him in cold blood. Carter wasn’t even in on the original double cross, although he is protecting Val. Gibson killed him only to intimidate another second-tier gangster (Fairfax, played by James Coburn) into getting him “his” money. The life-price takes another dip.

The second most annoying thing about this movie – after the point about it being bankrupt of ideas – is the dumb and dumber routine played by Gibson. This may be necessary for the plot since top mob characters have to be sucked into his carefully disguised trap. But, the day after sneaking into the mob’s downtown hotel and into Val’s room, where Val is playing S and M with a hooker – a move that must have

demanding at least some verve – Porter casually strolls to the rendezvous where Val was supposed to return “his” money. Porter was obviously a very slow learner. Hadn’t he learned how trustworthy this guy was earlier in the flashback? Yeah, but this time, Val must be on the level? So, just like that, with no plan, no back-up, just open season on careless, trusting, leading men, Gibson shows up to be paid back. It’s annoying when the plot depends on stupidity. It’s difficult to know when the Gibson character is playing dumb and when it’s no act.

The “this little piggy” scene was effective, though. So was the suspense of the attempt to rescue the kidnapee. After losing a couple of his “piggies” to a hammer rather than give Bronson the address where Rosie is holding the kingpin’s son as a hostage, Gibson caves in. The scenes then cuts rapidly from the mob heavies heading for the address he supplies, to Rosie pacing the floor waiting for word from Porter, to Gibson struggling to free himself from the locked trunk of Bronson’s limo – they’ll deal with him after the hostage is freed -- to Gibson desperately trying to dial a number on the car phone. Will he be able to warn Rosie in time? It doesn’t look like it. As the hoods burst into the apartment, the phone starts to ring and Bronson answers it. But the joke is on them. Maybe it was worth two toes.

In the end you’re still left with the question that the hoods in the movie couldn’t get – all this, for \$70,000? There are principles and then there is stupidity. The Gibson character has the latter in spades. Rosie and Porter are going to have a very short honeymoon in Canada, and not just because their stake is pretty low.