

Good cop, bad cop

by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [April 5, 2003](#) issue

Ron Shelton's powerfully unsettling *Dark Blue* is about the coming apart of a Los Angeles cop. Eldon Perry (Kurt Russell) is about to make lieutenant, and he is deeply entrenched in the LAPD's boys' club network. But his blustery macho armor encases the memory of his murder of an innocent suspect. He's never forgiven himself for it, and the guilt is eating away at him; he's become a mass of self-loathing (and an alcoholic).

That history provides his subterranean motive, hidden even from himself, for putting his novice partner, Bobby Keough (Scott Speedman), through the same ordeal. He pushes Bobby to shoot a man Perry has framed to cover up the crimes of two hoodlums who are in the pay of Perry's boss, police chief Jack Van Meter (Brendon Gleeson).

But Bobby is still within salvation's reach. He's just begun an affair with Beth Williamson (Michael Michele), a good cop who's allied with the crusading would-be reformer Arthur Holland (Ving Rhames). Beth and Holland are outside the rotten heart of the force, and with good reason: both are black. It's 1991. John Ayers's script (based on a story by novelist James Ellroy) is framed by the Rodney King trial and the L.A. riots.

If you've seen Shelton's other movies, all of which involve sports (they include *Bull Durham*, *White Men Can't Jump* and *Cobb*, one of the two or three best biographical films ever made in this country), it may take you a little while to get used to what is brand-new territory for him. He doesn't tread gingerly, though. *Dark Blue* is that rare movie in which surface and depth work in tandem: the tautness of the suspense doesn't have to compensate for thinness of content as it often does in cop pictures. When *Dark Blue* begins with Eldon pacing a motel room while the video of the police beating King plays on the TV in the background, you know you've landed in no common action thriller.

Shelton has made a cop film with a political subtext, and he's shaped it as a psychological study. Perry is a man at war with himself because, though he's

swallowed the immorality of his actions and those of the system he's sworn loyalty to, he's constitutionally incapable of keeping it down.

The acting is impeccable, down to the small roles--Lolita Davidovich as Perry's wife, who can't stand to live with him any more (she drinks, too, but not with Eldon), Dash Mihok and Kurupt as Van Meter's loose-cannon stooges, and Khandi Alexander as Holland's wife. (Fans of *ER* will remember that Rhames and Alexander used to play husband and wife on that show, which for a couple of seasons featured Michele as a pediatrician.)

It's Kurt Russell's movie, though. Among the top echelon of Hollywood's leading men, Russell must surely be the most underrated. Considering the work he's done in movies as disparate as *Used Cars*, *Silkwood*, *Tequila Sunrise* and *Breakdown*, you wonder why he hasn't received more acclaim. In *Dark Blue* he plays off Perry's thick skin against his diseased soul. The core of the performance is the moving scene in which Beth forces him to acknowledge that his behavior has poisoned the young partner he loves.

The juxtaposition of Perry's story with historical events presents Perry as a reflection of a culture and a way of thinking. Dramatically, it sets up two explosions that mirror each other: Eldon's last-ditch effort to recover his lost righteousness takes him through the battleground of the riots. This sequence is so tense and startling you feel as if Shelton's crack editor, Paul Seydor, had cut it with a penknife, but the poetry of the images is never sacrificed for the visceral excitement. We get them both.

When a tall black man swinging a baseball bat steps out of the smoke as Perry's car rolls quietly past, you wonder if you've landed in hell. In the darkest part of his exploration of an America turned on itself, the director of *Bull Durham* has found a new use for that bat.