16 Blocks

Talent: Bruce Willis, Mos Def, David Morse.

Writer/director/editor: Richard Donner
Classification: M (Mature)
Duration: 105 minutes
We rate it: Three stars.

To say that audiences haven’t heard much of Bruce Willis lately isn’t quite accurate; the actor has voiced a number of animated characters recently, even if he hasn’t appeared in the visual sense terribly often. As a man who became a superstar in the 1980s, Willis doesn’t need to work constantly: I’m sure the villa in Tuscany or the castle in the Scottish Highlands would have been comfortably paid for by now. It’s interesting, then, to observe the kinds of roles that will draw Bruce back in front of the cameras: with 16 Blocks, the actor is returning to the kind of grungy, unshaven, hard-drinking cop he played in the third Die Hard film.

The character in question is one Jack Mosley, a has-been figure who seems to be biding his time in the New York Police Department, waiting disinterestedly until he can retire. It is precisely because his de-motivated, ineffectual presence is so clumsy and easily missed that his superiors saddle him with what seems at first to be a routine mission, but which turns out to be something far more sinister.

Willis is given the task of transporting a witness in a murder case to his appointment in a courtroom across town. The young Eddie Bunker (surely named after the famous ex-con and crime writer), is here played by Rap artist Mos Def, an actor who incidentally possesses what is perhaps the most excruciating vocal whine ever to utter dialogue. Bunker is a timid, fast-talking figure who seems terrified of his own shadow (for good reason, as it turns out), and is apprehensive from the beginning about leaving his jail cell in order to testify. The fact that he is a key witness in an important prosecution is puzzling until we learn who is being prosecuted: a group of corrupt police officers. Def has been an unwilling witness to an execution-style killing, and he is the lynchpin in the case that prosecutors want to bring in order to rid the force of a particularly nasty group of crooked cops. Thus Mosley and Bunker, making their way across Manhattan in the traffic, suddenly become the targets for a group of vigilantes who are hell-bent on preventing the young con making his court appointment.

Director Richard Donner is no stranger to urban thrillers and action films; he has directed many effective big-budget offerings over the last twenty years, most notably
the entire Lethal Weapon series. With 16 Blocks, the director seems to be harking back to some of the gritty, low-key thrillers of the 1970s, films like Dog Day Afternoon and some of Clint Eastwood’s more offbeat work. (In fact, though it seems not to have been acknowledged in the credits, the 1977 Eastwood vehicle The Gauntlet was almost certainly a direct inspiration for 16 Blocks. Willis plays a near-identical character to the one Eastwood played 20 years ago, and the plot shares so many details that it almost qualifies as a remake.)

The low-key nature of 16 Blocks, however, is its sticking point. While Donner can put an action scene together with incredible proficiency, he isn’t quite so adept at keeping us riveted while characters exchange copious amounts of dialogue. It isn’t that 16 Blocks is so incredibly talky, it’s just that while the characters are dodging bullets and running across rooftops, things are more exciting than when they’re holed up in basements getting to know each other. Furthermore, given Mos Def’s unbelievably grating voice, it’s a mercy whenever he stops speaking. I was not alone in wondering how on earth Donner chose someone with such a wince-inducing voice to act alongside the smooth-talking Willis. The contrast between the actors’ vocal patterns makes for unintentional laughs at the most inappropriate times.

16 Blocks stands as an interesting, reasonably entertaining film that showcases Bruce Willis in fine form playing a rough diamond trying to redeem himself. The stunts are spectacular and the premise is engaging, but the pace slows far too often for this to qualify as an edge-of-the-seat ride. 16 Blocks is a proficient, but not terribly memorable urban drama.

Nick Prescott