Talk to Me

Talent: Don Cheadle, Chiwetel Ejiofor, Martin Sheen, Cedric the Entertainer, Elle Downs, Vondie Curtis-Hall.

Date of review: Thursday 21st February, 2008

Director: Kasi Lemmons
Duration: 118 minutes
Classification: M
We rate it: Four stars.

A fitting film to review on radio, this: Talk to Me tells the quite fascinating story of Ralph Waldo “Petey” Green, an African-American ex-convict who, in the mid-late 1960s, became a sensation, a radio personality the likes of whom Washington DC had never heard. Don Cheadle, the brilliant actor who has done so much great work with Steven Soderbergh (most people think of him as the fun-loving Basher Tarr from the Ocean’s films, but he’s also done great work in Traffic and Out of Sight) here plays the real-life (and larger-than-life) figure of Green, who, without any real training in either public speaking or radio work, talked his way onto the American airwaves in 1966 and changed them forever.

Talk to Me does a number of things at once. It functions as a bio-pic of a terrifically charismatic, in-your-face man who became the voice of the African-American population of Washington DC at a particular time in history; it also provides a portrait of a turbulent time in American politics and social history, and a snapshot of a part of Black American culture that relatively few recent films have treated seriously. (Think of the number of recent films that have used 'Fros and soul music as running gags and pieces of dated culture to be laughed at: this is not at all the case here.)

The star turn of this film is absolutely Don Cheadle’s, though he’s quite brilliantly matched by the wonderful Chiwetel Ejiofor, a British-Nigerian actor who hasn’t put a foot wrong in anything I’ve seen him in. He has delivered memorable performances in films as diverse as Children of Men, Dirty Pretty Things and Kinky Boots, and has worked just as brilliantly on television, with his performance in the recent BBC adaptation of one of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales a particular standout. Ejiofor, here playing Green’s mentor and eventual manager, is a charismatic, studious actor whose ability to convey emotional complexity and completely inhabit his characters is extremely impressive. An actor as powerful as Ejiofor was needed to balance Cheadle’s intensity in this film, and the pairing works perfectly.
Talk to Me has been directed by Kasi Lemmons, herself an actress of note and director of four films now. The movie has been well made, and features convincing period detail and a raft of sterling supporting performances, including notable turns from Martin Sheen (as the somewhat conservative studio boss) and Lemmons’ real-life husband, Vondie Curtis-Hall, as a co-worker of Petey’s. The expected soundtrack of 60s soul music is there in abundance, and actually provides what was for me the only minor detraction from this otherwise admirable film: the use of period music becomes steadily more clichéd as the film progresses, and sadly this makes some of the fine songs sound rather hollow and obvious. Nonetheless, as a minor reservation it pales into insignificance; like the recent Bobby, this is an actor’s film made by an accomplished actor, and it’s a fine piece of work.

Nick Prescott