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A Response to F. Gary Gray’s *Set it Off*

F. Gary Gray’s brilliant 1996 crime drama *Set it Off* was more than a delightful treat, it could very well be my favorite film out of African-American Cinema thus far. It told a concise narrative that somehow perfectly blended humor and tragedy all at once. A beautiful example of this is Queen Latifah’s character Cleo. In the beginning, she starts off as the lancer of the group; bold and brash, do-before-think, and more often than not being the “inciting incident” of every situation the girls get in. Latifah performs the character in a way that makes her endearing, and beyond that Cleo does come out for the team when she is needed. When the climax happens, she makes the ultimate sacrificial move for her friends, knowing very well she will not come out of it alive. T.T.’s death was already heartbreaking; she was a mother and she initially wanted no part in the violence or crime. But Cleo is choosing to sacrifice herself for the hope that Frankie and Stony could escape brings the perfect conclusion to her arc. She chooses to go out on her own terms, which ultimately makes an example of what Gray set out to convey in this movie’s overarching theme of society’s betrayal of black lower-class women. It will be a film that, for very good reason, I won’t forget for as long as I live.

Works Cited

Gray, F. Gary, director. *Set It Off*. New Line Cinema, 1996.