Bullet to the Head

R

91 Minutes

Rating: **** out of *****

Assassin. Fixer. Hitman. Whatever you call him, the hired gun has been a staple of movies for decades, from Alad Ladd in THIS GUN FOR HIRE to Tom Cruise in COLLATERAL. The best of the breed is certainly Chow Yun Fat as THE KILLER from 1989, and while Sylvester Stallone’s latest entry, BULLET TO THE HEAD, is nowhere near that level, it is pretty good.

Stallone stars as a lifelong rulebreaker who only knows one way to live: by making sure other people don’t. He does have a few rules...he only kills people who have it coming (in his eyes), never works with cops, and never shoots women or children. But when a supposedly simple job goes awry and his partner gets killed, Stallone finds himself forced to break one of his basic principles and make a deal with a cop (Sung Kang). Someone is behind the scenes pulling the strings, and Stallone is a loose end they want to cut off.

As its title suggests, BULLET TO THE HEAD isn’t the most subtle piece of filmmaking. It’s all about action and suspense, and director Walter Hill knows how to make the most of the basic script. The action is brutal and life is cheap, and Stallone and Kang frequently find themselves backed into corners with no option but to fight their way out. Though their characters don’t trust one another, Kang and Stallone have a great chemistry and their choleric exchanges are often surprisingly witty and sometimes truly riotous.

Acting is quite good for this type of film, with Stallone having lost none of his powerful onscreen presence over the years. His hitman is hard and dangerous, but not unsympathetic. Jason Momoa is on hand as Stallone’s opposite number, a hired gun employed by the antagonists. Some of you may remember Momoa from the remake of CONAN THE BARBARIAN a couple years back. Have no fear, Momoa is a far better mercenary than he was a sword-wielding barbarian. His mercenary is big, bad, and probably crazy, but like Stallone’s character lives by a personal code of honor that his more profit-minded employer cannot understand. Rounding out the quality cast is Christian Slater as a white collar criminal who isn’t as much in control as he thinks he is, and Sarah Shahi brings a sort of noir-like mystery and beauty to the affair as Stallone’s daughter.

BULLET TO THE HEAD is a very entertaining film. There’s no shortage of explosive action along with the requisite high body count and the cast and crew lift what could have been a pedestrian exercise to a higher plane of professional achievement. This isn’t a film that’s going to change your life, but if you like actioners and thrillers, you won’t regret taking a BULLET TO THE HEAD.