

## Document Citation

Title	<b>25th hour</b>
Author(s)	David Rooney
Source	<i>Variety</i>
Date	2002 Dec 16
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	40
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	25th hour, Lee, Spike, 2002



## 25TH HOUR

A Buena Vista release of a Touchstone Pictures presentation of a 40 Acres and a Mule Filmworks, Industry Entertainment, Gamut Films production. Produced by Spike Lee, Jon Kilik, Tobey Maguire, Julia Chasman. Executive producer, Nick Wechsler.

Directed by Spike Lee. Screenplay, David Benioff, based on his novel. Camera (Technicolor, widescreen), Rodrigo Prieto; editor, Barry Alexander Brown; music, Terence Blanchard; production designer, James Chinlund; art director, Nicholas Lundy; set decorator, Ondine Karady; costume designer, Sandra Hernandez; sound (SDDS/Dolby Digital/DTS Digital), Rolf Pardula; associate producer, Jeff Somerville; assistant director, Mike Ellis; second unit camera, Ellen Kuras; casting, Aisha Coley. Reviewed at Disney screening room, New York, Dec. 9, 2002. MPAA Rating: R. Running time: 134 MIN.

Monty Brogan ..... Edward Norton  
Jacob Elinsky .... Philip Seymour Hoffman  
Francis Xavier

Slaughter ..... Barry Pepper  
Naturelle Riviera ..... Rosario Dawson  
Mary D'Annunzio ..... Anna Paquin  
James Brogan ..... Brian Cox  
Kostya Novotny ..... Tony Siragusa  
Uncle Nikolai ..... Levani  
Senka Valghobek ..... Misha Kuznetsov  
Agent Flood ..... Isiah Whitlock Jr.  
Agent Cunningham ..... Michael Genet

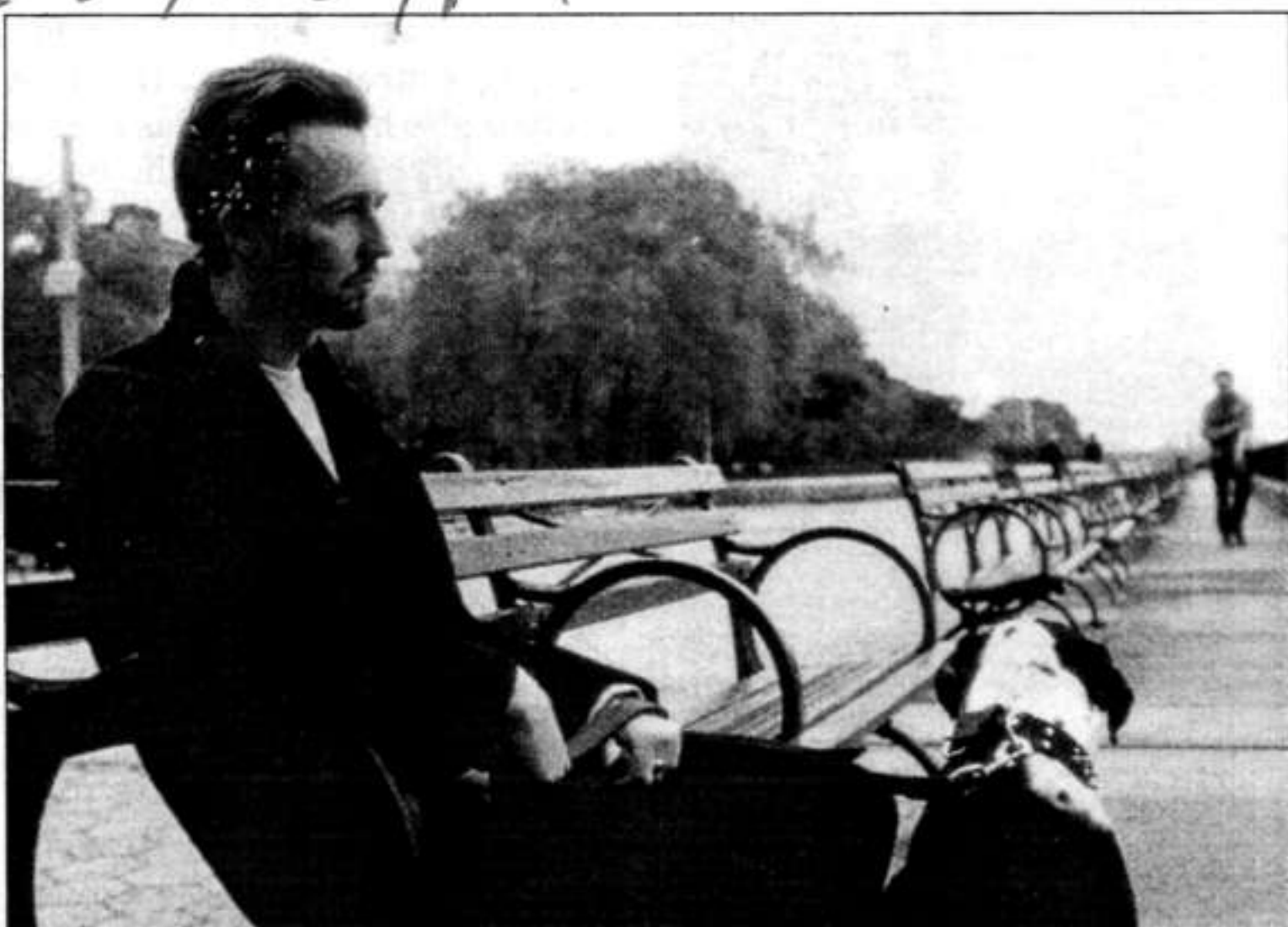
By DAVID ROONEY

**Ubiquitous novelist-screenwriter David Benioff gets his first screen credit with an ambitious adaptation for director Spike Lee of his debut novel "25th Hour," about a convicted drug dealer coming to terms with his life and choices during his last 24 hours of freedom. Attempting to transform superior pulp into something thematically richer, the writer and director heighten the role of the story's setting to create a post-9/11 symphony on the strength, resilience and hope of New York City that's sure to draw considerable attention. Some lapses into melodramatic self-importance and gratuitous stylistic flourishes that take the audience out of the action will rankle many critics, but these concerns are outweighed by the steadily amplified emotional power of this ultimately moving drama. However, the introspective odyssey appears unlikely to cross beyond Lee's standard commercial threshold.**

Touchstone deserves credit for backing such unconventional material. Character-driven pic provides strong opportunities for a fine ensemble of actors and for Lee, maintaining his signature style, to depart from his regular ethnic territory, working for the first time with a drama built predominantly around white characters, and to deliver one of his more interesting recent films.

Drama marks an intelligent, textured screenwriting debut for NYC native Benioff, attached to a slew of high-profile studio projects, adapting everything from Hemingway to Homer and penning scripts for directors such as Wolfgang Petersen, David Fincher, Kimberly Peirce, Curtis Hanson and Marc Forster.

Benioff sticks close to the structure and much of the razor-sharp dialogue of the already highly cinematic 2001 novel, resulting in a multicharacter narrative that continually shifts from the central figure to take in the lives of the people



**FLEETING FREEDOM:** Edward Norton is an upper-cruiser convicted on drug charges, who reflects on his life during his last day before having to serve a prison sentence in Spike Lee's "25th Hour."

around him. While disrupting some of the film's focus, this adds an engaging novelistic tableau.

Taking place over a volatile 24-hour period in much the same way as Lee's "Do the Right Thing," story picks up on savvy, educated Brooklynite Monty Brogan (Edward Norton) with one day to go before checking in to prison for seven years on a drug conviction. Monty tries to account for the direction his life has taken while saying his good-byes to family, friends, his drug associates and Naturelle (Rosario Dawson), the girlfriend who may or may not have sold him out to the DEA. The day and night serve also as a farewell to the city he knows from a position of privilege and power.

The film focuses as much on Monty's friends, examining the way personal history outweighs any present connection for the three central characters, who went through school together. Trio's other two members are hotshot Wall Street bond trader Frank (Barry Pepper), who grew up with Monty in an Irish neighborhood, and Jacob (Philip Seymour Hoffman), a poorly paid teacher described by Frank as a "whining malcontent," whose sorry existence is an apology for his rich Jewish upbringing.

Both men are down on themselves for allowing Monty to become enmeshed in the drug business. Jacob's self-loathing gets additional fuel from his attraction to underage lit student Mary (Anna Paquin), who manipulates him with her sexuality but is shocked when he responds.

Prior to a private party in a club run by Russian mobster Uncle Nikolai (Levani), Monty has dinner with his widowed father (Brian Cox). Still grieving his wife after many years and now readying to grieve in a different way for his son, the man is full of self-reproach for having accepted Monty's dirty money to pull the bar he owns out of debt.

Screenplay meanders a bit over various encounters and flashbacks such as Monty's drug bust and his first meeting with Naturelle, but builds confidently toward a brutal climax, which underlines the complexity of the flawed but binding relationships.

The narrative is punctuated by some bold set pieces, some better

than others. As Monty stares into a restroom mirror, he launches into a long "fuck-you" to every part of New York and every faction of its citizenry. Vastly elaborated from the book, this angry ode-cum-homage feels wedged in and ostentatious. Likewise is a scene in Frank's downtown apartment overlooking construction work at Ground Zero, which Lee lingers on far too long, bludgeoning the audience with righteous indignation.

The tendency for over-extended scenes is a constant, but the most impressive stylistic detour is a long flash-forward, superbly delivered in a monologue by Cox, imagining an alternative future for Monty.

The novel repeatedly dwells upon Monty's head-turning physical beauty; his pretty-boy face is considered a sure ticket to bitch-boy status on the cell-block — a major fear factor for him. While Norton is a less obvious choice for the role than, say, Brad Pitt or Johnny Depp, he convinces with effortless charisma and intelligence. Norton penetrates the mindset of a guy with an expiration date on his freedom, creating a character that has existed comfortably on dubious moral ground but is neither a bad person nor entirely unsympathetic.

Hoffman plays a conflicted man who's chronically miserable yet idealistic and not without hope, while Pepper contributes perhaps his best screen work to date, juggling love and resentment for Monty, quietly burning for his girlfriend and simmering with judgmental anger. Paquin is sassy and outwardly hard-edged, while Dawson's lovely performance balances the uneasiness that suspicion has introduced into the relationship with tenderness and her determination to stay close to Monty through a tough time.

Mexican cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto ("Amores perros," "8 Mile") brings a gritty look to the widescreen visuals, orchestrating beautiful, fluid tracking shots and often playing with color saturation and film stock to create grainy textures.

As always in Lee's collaborations with composer Terence Blanchard, music is used under almost every scene, sometimes to rather bombastic effect. Laced with haunting Tamil vocals by British-based Sri Lankan musician Manickam Yogeswaran, the full-bodied, brooding score contributes to an at times overly portentous, operatic feel, but is key to establishing and sustaining the drama's uneasy, troubling mood and shaping its emotional crescendo.

**Lee, maintaining his signature style, works for the first time with a drama built predominantly around white characters.**