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**Starring Russell Crowe, Denzel Washington
Directed by Ridley Scott**

Anchored by Crowe, Washington and Scott, this is a pedigree production on a sure march to the trophy cupboard. Its persuasive narrative fuses Scott's trademark polish with the story's gritty truth, and the results are never less than attention-grabbing. Frank Lucas (Washington) is Harlem's number one drug baron, with an empire that runs from war-torn Asia to the projects of America. It succeeds because he is a man of principle who knows how to keep his head down. Detective Roberts (Crowe) is another man of principle who wants to stem the flow of heroin, thus igniting a dangerous game of cat and mouse.

American Gangster is a highly enjoyable film that mixes genres and milieus without indulging in mere homage. Scott contains Crowe and Washington, who return towering performances, and while violent, keeps us protected from a Scorsese-style slaughterhouse. He flirts with big themes like the institution of family and how peas-in-a-pod like Lucas and Roberts grow so differently. It's almost the stuff of modern classics. Unfortunately, Scott gives in to stunts and chases, dropping threads and adding a peculiar coda that finally tips the balance, rendering merely good the great work that went before.

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