

The Taking of Pelham 123 (2009)

Rated PG-13. Our ratings: V-5 ; L-7 ; S/N-0 . Running time: 1 hour 46 min.

*My soul melts away for sorrow;
strengthen me according to your word.
Put false ways far from me;
and graciously teach me your law.
I have chosen the way of faithfulness;
I set your ordinances before me.
Psalm 119:28-30*

Denzel Washington's Walter Garber talks with the
Garber might well find solace in leader of the gang.

the psalmist's prayer. He is the
subway train dispatcher who has ^{2009 Paramount Pictures}
to make a painful decision that
could ruin his life or save
another life, the outcome
depending on which choice he
makes. Garber is working the NYC
Transit dispatch desk on a
temporary basis—actually he is a
Transit Authority executive
temporarily demoted while he is
being investigated for bribe
taking. His day starts out the
same as every other day until
something seems to be going
haywire with one of the trains,
Pelham 123, which he soon
discovers has been taken over by
four ruthless bandits intent on
extracting ten million dollars

as ransom for the hostages. It is during a radio exchange with the leader of the gang, Ryder, played by John Travolta, that the latter poses a Truth or Consequences question to Garber about his past—did he accept a payment from the Japanese firm bidding on the replacement of train cars, or not?

Director Tony Scott and screenwriter Brian Helgeland's remake of the 1974 thriller that starred Walter Matthau and Robert Shaw as hero and villain is enjoyable, but nonetheless, it makes one appreciate the original all the more. The pace is faster this time, the special effects are more spectacular (though not as believable), and the ransom amount has been upped ten times over (allowing, no doubt, for inflation—maybe this also accounts for the higher body count in the new version), and the villain is far more coldhearted, but the 1974 is more gritty, like NYC itself, and far more believable, with the various supporting characters, on the subway and at the communications center, better developed. One thing shared by both films is the puzzlement of the good guys over how the crooks plan to escape: the robbers are hemmed in a train in a tunnel, and there are cops in the tunnel itself and at every exit! Even in 1974 the technology was advanced enough so that each train could be tracked as to its location and speed, so how can the killers possibly hope to get away?

The one improvement, for me at least, is the dilemma that Garber is placed in by Ryder's question. Matthau played a transit cop who is a straightforward good guy, but Washington's character is more ambiguous. Ryder has already shown that his threat to kill a hostage, even if the ransom money is a minute late in arriving, is no bluff. Thus his threat to kill the hostage next to him if Garber does not

immediately answer truthfully his question about the charge of bribery is a real dilemma: shall he take a chance with the man's life by lying in the hope that Ryder might believe him, or tell the truth, with all the police and transit officials listening in?

Warning: spoiler ahead! The new ending, though not as clever as the original, is suitable for Washington's character, returning to his home that night not as the Mayor had offered, in his luxurious sedan as the conquering hero, but simply, taking the subway and walking to his house, as he had done hundreds of times before. Scott's version is definitely worth seeing and discussing, but do yourself a favor and rent the DVD of the old version as well.

For Reflection/Discussion

1. What do you think of Walter Garber's dilemma? How does his decision in the past show that he shares at least a little bit of the larceny that has overwhelmed Ryder? How does he justify what he did? Have you faced a similar temptation?
2. How does Garber's decision show compassion and courage?
3. What do you think of his answer to the Mayor's offer at the end of the day? How is this in keeping with what we have seen of him throughout the film?
4. If you have seen the original, compare the way in which the Mayor and his advisers are portrayed as they decide about the ransom demand. Which is a better satire of the workings of bureaucracy? Also, compare the very different ways in which the two versions end.