

Trading Places

by Emily Soares | November 06, 2009



Heavily influenced by Mark Twain's "The Million Pound Note" and "The Prince and the Pauper," **Trading Places** (1983) is about two privileged brothers who make a wager over whether environment or heredity make the man. The outcome will be decided by two subjects from entirely different walks of life. Their pawns are pasty and priggish Louis Winthorpe III (Dan Aykroyd) and streetwise con artist Billy Ray Valentine (Eddie Murphy). What happens next is a reversal of fortunes that results in a foolproof audience pleaser.

Rich, bored and happy to wreak havoc with their purse strings, the Duke brothers (Ralph Bellamy and Don Ameche) relish the game, manipulating the lives of their chosen victims: Winthorpe, a star employee who manages their commodity brokerage, and Valentine, who accidentally stumbles into Winthorpe and onto the brothers' radar while running from the police. Winthorpe wrongly accuses Valentine of trying to rob him and sends the man to jail, but the tables are about to turn. The Dukes bail him out, move Valentine into Winthorpe's life and systematically dismantle Winthorpe by taking away his money, home, job and dignity. They then sit back to see how each man will succeed or fail in his new role. In the tradition of all good fairy tales, however, the wronged parties gain the upper hand in the end.

In true John Landis style, **Trading Places** is loaded with cameos: Bo Diddley as a pawn broker, *Saturday Night Live* alums Al Franken and Tom Davis are baggage handlers, Jim Belushi is a New Year's Eve partier in a gorilla suit, and puppeteer/director/actor Frank Oz appears as the policeman taking inventory of Winthorpe's personal property. His role here reprises that in *The Blues Brothers* (1980), in which he inventories the contents of Jake and Elwood's pockets.

A lot was written about **Trading Places** at the time, and almost all of it was positive. Praise was heaped upon Murphy's superstar qualities and plenty of kudos were given to Aykroyd for having redeemed himself in the wake of *Neighbors* (1981) and *Doctor Detroit* (1983). The use of Bellamy, Ameche and Denholm Elliott (Winthorpe and Valentine's butler) in meaty comic roles was appreciated, as was Jamie Lee Curtis' part as a hooker with a heart of gold.

Almost universally, **Trading Places** was considered an effective return to the populist stories of Frank Capra and Preston Sturges. Andrew Sarris, in his *Village Voice* review, felt that though the film ultimately leaves viewers with the message that being rich is best, its presentation was still exceptional for the era: "In this overall context of Reaganish me-ness and meanness run amok, **Trading Places** seems almost like a beacon of humanism, simply because the entire cast somehow projects an aura of amiability and camaraderie." As Rex Reed put it for *Newsday* on 6/8/83, "[T]he movie is about something. It even has a moral. *Trading Places* is updated Frank Capra with four-letter words, and I can think of no higher praise than that."

Producer: Aaron Russo
Director: John Landis
Screenplay: Timothy Harris, Herschel Weingrod
Cinematography: Robert Paynter
Music: Elmer Bernstein
Film Editing: Malcolm Campbell
Cast: Denholm Elliott (Coleman), Dan Aykroyd (Louis Winthorpe III), Ralph Bellamy (Randolph Duke), Don Ameche (Mortimer Duke), Eddie Murphy (Billy Ray Valentine), Avon Long (Ezra), Robert Curtis Brown (Todd), Nicholas Guest (Harry), John Bedford-Lloyd (Andrew), Tony Sherer (Philip), Kristin Holby (Penelope Witherspoon), Clint Smith (Doo Rag Lenny), Paul Gleason (Clarence Beeks), Jamie Lee Curtis (Ophelia), Alfred Drake (President of Exchange), James Belushi (Harvey).
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