



**Rampart at Cornerhouse, Manchester**

**Reviewed by Ian Betts March 2012**

Apparently, Woody Harrelson's father was a [contract killer](#) . Convicted for murder in 1973 when Woody was 12, and later given a life sentence for murdering a judge, Charles V Harrelson spent the majority of his son's life in prison until he died there from a heart attack in 2007.

Did this affect Woody? Undoubtedly so. "It was just mind-blowing to see all the things he did just like me," he explained in a recent [interview](#) . If some characteristics have proven inescapable, it's also hard not to draw parallels between their chosen career paths, both men having found their way as a kind of fiend-for-hire, albeit in very different industries.

Certainly, you can see the father's influence in the son's latest role. As corrupt Los Angeles cop Dave Brown in **Rampart**, Harrelson the younger explores the dark, immoral underbelly of the Californian capital. "I never hurt any good people," he swears, yet we see him manipulating colleagues, torturing witnesses and shooting innocents all in the name of the law.

The pressure mounts when Brown is filmed repeatedly clubbing an unarmed man who drove into his patrol car, with the resulting media coverage serving to vilify an already unpopular and immoral Police Department. This act of violence recalls the beating of [Rodney King](#), which led to the LA riots in 1992 after the acquittal of the officers involved; Brown's character, a violent, maniacal ego, serves to embody everything rotten about the city's law enforcement agencies, the depiction of a "token fascist" serving to explain the tyrannical and inhuman attitudes of public officials at the time.

Yet although Brown is easily cast as a hate figure - director Oren Moverman is sure to include a number of grotesque scenes, ironically of Brown eating, so that we are completely repulsed by him - being the subject of the film, he is at times charming and altogether more fragile than his professional conduct would suggest.

At the heart of the story are the character's failing relationships. His dysfunctional polygamy with two frivolous, beguiling sisters (skilfully played by Anne Heche and Cynthia Nixon) is disintegrating despite having produced a daughter with them each. Brown seeks sexual satisfaction elsewhere; his shameless carnal appetite leads him to drug dens and foot fetishists, and into the arms of an equally damaged and lascivious defence lawyer played by Robin Wright. Together, the pair seem to reconcile their demons while enabling their worst vices too, their alcohol-fuelled denials proving as touching as they are pathetic.

Crucially, the film recognises that the greatest victims of Brown's indiscretions are his own daughters. Despite his efforts to be endearing, we see Brown becoming increasingly detached as they learn of his sins and transgressions, watching as he grows powerless to prevent the resulting deterioration of his mental condition. He is consumed with paranoia, seeking out drugs and sex in a self-destructive pattern that manifests itself in the girls' angry rebellion against the man who has failed them.

It is a vicious, vice-ridden film, which only works because of Moverman's ability to place distance between the audience and the central character. Often the officer is seen in the distance, trapped behind railings or confined within his patrol car. Is he to blame for the city's emergence as a violent arena, or a product of it? Like [Hitchcock](#), the director understands that true malevolence comes through suggesting a terrible act rather than depicting it in gory detail, and we are spared seeing Brown's most depraved acts but continue in the knowledge that the rapes and murders have occurred.



This harrowing representation of a law enforcer is deeply upsetting. Instead of defending the weak, Brown preys on them. Worse still, at times it seems that his work is what has distanced him; his interactions are procedural, questioning his daughters as he would suspects. Officer Brown would rather enforce control than seek answers, and his abuse of society's legal framework suggests a deep mistrust of the systems we have created to protect us.

Thus the wounds of the King scandal remain deep and open. It may be uncomfortable viewing, but **Rampart** addresses important concerns about law enforcement and the failings of a capitalist democracy to protect minority groups in what has become a plural society. The

supporting cast is a testament to these concerns, and mesmerising performances from talent such as Sigourney Weaver, Steve Buscemi, Ned Beatty and Ice Cube draw attention to the corruption and immorality that allowed such violence to flourish. It is an unflinching, powerful drama and Moverman avoids glamorising their contributions, instead presenting each character as a puckered, wrinkled victim of a sinister urban conflict.

For a number of years, HBO series such as **The Sopranos**, **The Wire** and **Boardwalk Empire** have lured us into a state of moral ambiguity through the presentation of corrupted yet equally affable protagonists.

### **Rampart**

takes this a step further, and while it is hard not to be disgusted by elements of this film and its subject in particular, it also stands up as an honest confrontation of the deep-rooted social issues and flaws in contemporary American culture.

It is a troubling perspective to take, and one that is not easily resolved. Moverman is not so crass as to wind up the film with a clichéd, Manichean verdict of guilty or not guilty, good or evil. In fact, such is the willingness of the director to eschew narrative convention that the film finishes by confronting the audience with a number of lurid, dissolved images of the central character against realistic, diegetic sounds, the juxtaposition proving evocative and unsettling: do such men continue in our midst? Some audience members may find this question frustrating or lacking in gratification, but I think that is supposed to be the point.

Nevertheless, **Rampart** remains a brutal, potent and disturbing character study.