

CASINO ROYALE

Directed by Martin Campbell
Produced by Michael G. Wilson and Barbara Broccoli
Distributed by Columbia Pictures
Released in 2006

When EON Productions, purveyors of the James Bond franchise, secured the rights to Ian Fleming's first James Bond novel, *Casino Royale*, after a titanic legal struggle with Sony (who was trying to start a rival Bond series with *Never Say Never Again* producer Kevin McClory, starring Liam Neeson), EON could finally rest easy and stop worrying that the Bond brand would be tarnished by a slipshod rival film. This is what happened in 1967 when *Casino Royale*, starring David Niven, competed with Sean Connery's *You Only Live Twice* for Bondian buzz. So EON had the playing field to themselves.

But it seemed impossible that they could do justice to the novel's sedate pacing, intrigue, and heartache, all of which distinguished Bond as a bitter, broken hero who is forced to stare death in the face, only to survive to face something worse.

Once Sony, in turn, bought MGM-UA in 2005 (primarily for the half-share ownership of the Bond franchise they'd always pined for) it seemed more likely than ever that the latest Bond film would betray this new corporate mega-behemoth's demands for a pop corn-popping blow-out that would serve corporate coffers and casual fans but would destroy a last, best chance for the franchise's redemption.

But then the unthinkable happened. After starring in four Bond movies, his last becoming the highest-grossing in the franchise's history, Pierce Brosnan was sacked! He was almost a decade younger than Roger Moore when he finally retired at age 58. *Die Another Day* was a wild ride, but it gave undue emphasis to some embarrassingly hackneyed sci-fi elements and put too much faith in Halle Berry's burdensome Jinx character.

The series had a history of dialing back after a fantastical Bond (*On Her Majesty's Secret Service* followed *You Only Live Twice* and *For Your Eyes Only* followed *Moonraker*). But *Casino Royale*, to be given a proper translation, would have to be an origin story (an idea the EON team conceived of some twenty years before *Batman Begins* launched a wave of franchise reboots). And if it would be an origin piece, then Pierce Brosnan would have to go. He had been an increasing burden anyway, always insisting that the series become grittier (which was fitfully doable) and sexually explicit (which was fraught with difficulty; the heavily-edited sex scene between Bond and Jinx in *Die Another Day* becoming the first to show Bond and his lady in the clinch). And Brosnan always wanted more money. His three-film-plus-one contract was up. A fifth could cost the producers \$30 million. Barbara Broccoli and Michael Wilson knew that Bond was the draw, not the actor. They just had to find someone with the right balance of handsomeness, dormant cruelty, youth, muscularity, height, humor, fighting ability, and acting skills. Of course he also had to be nominally British, not a star but not unknown, and willing to be typecast forever.

It was actually a very difficult search. But whether he was their first choice or not (getting to the bottom of such matters is like emptying a swimming pool with a ladle), Daniel Craig has proven to be an invigorating choice.

The film would surpass *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* as the longest Bond film. There'd be enough action, but intricate dialogue and card playing scenes (interspersed with still more action) would shape character and develop tension. There would be almost no sex, no Money Penny, no Q, no quips. Bond would be more East End thug and less Wimbledon rogue. And he would make plenty of mistakes, his biggest one falling in love.

The previous Bond films had developed a loose timeline where the change in the actor playing M was sometimes acknowledged, but the changes in Bond actors were not. There were only two dependable landmark events of the series that could be relied upon as indisputable back-story. The first was the death of Tracy Bond, James's wife. She died in the arms of George Lazenby and was acknowledged in two Roger Moore movies, one Timothy Dalton film, and (obliquely) one Pierce Brosnan movie. The second was the maiming of Felix Leiter in *Licence to Kill* (the character of CIA contact Jack Wade may have been introduced in *GoldenEye* as a Felix substitute). Anything else beyond those two touchstones was in flux.

Starting fresh allowed the producers to counteract any mistakes that accrued over the years. (It may even facilitate the re-introduction of S.P.E.C.T.R.E. or the re-make of disappointing outings like *The Man With The Golden Gun*).

Even with all the perils of starting fresh and challenging complacent fans, *Casino Royale* is a jaw-dropping triumph that only looks better after the letdown of its brooding, hyperactive, over-cooked sequel, *Quantum of Solace*. They may never get it right again.

Casino Royale's defining scene is the interrogation. Bond has barely survived flipping his Aston Martin after swerving to save Vesper's life. The tracking chip is gouged out of his arm and Mathis is revealed as a traitor. So now Bond is truly alone. But then he is tossed in the backseat. He's with Vesper. He still has Vesper.

Arriving at a rusty old cargo ship, Bond is stripped naked and separated from Vesper. Le Chiffre begins the interrogation with pithy commentary on the wasted time of elaborate tortures—why not just hit a man in the balls 'til he screams? Bond, trying to keep his cool, still screams. He sees no hope. If he talks, he dies. If he doesn't talk, he dies. Le Chiffre threatens Vesper's dismemberment unless Bond complies soon.

Yet even while suffering incredible pain, Bond still tries to catch Le Chiffre off guard. He tauntingly informs Le Chiffre that he will never divulge the password, and that Le Chiffre's backers will exact a horrifying revenge for his carelessness. Then Le Chiffre drops the bomb: He reminds Bond that MI6 would love to protect Le Chiffre from his creditors. Le Chiffre chastises, "...Your people would still welcome me with open arms; because they need what I know."

"The big picture," Bond whispers. He knows this is true. And then Vesper screams and Bond turns toward her voice. His face reflects the agony of impotence. He has no bravado or tricks left. His spirit is as naked as his body.

Though it seems unintentional, his country has betrayed him. There's nothing left for Bond to do but chuckle at the madness of it all. He knew the life of a Double-0 was short. But just as he was willing to go after Le Chiffre with a knife before Felix stopped him (a desperate

plan that would have probably cost Bond his life), Bond is willing to die so Le Chiffre will die. Bond will die a most agonizing death, and he will sacrifice his beloved in the process. But he will not play games. There's a time for diplomacy and spying and a time for killing. Even though his country will step over Bond's eviscerated body to embrace Le Chiffre, Bond will not give in. It is the mission that matters, beyond love, beyond life. If necessary, Bond will drag Le Chiffre into the grave after him by sheer will power.

Bond's look upon hearing Vesper's scream is the pinnacle of the entire series. It defines Bond's character for a new, fresh start at cinematic glory.