

CHANGING LANES

Directed by Roger Michell
Produced by Scott Rudin
Distributed by Paramount Pictures
Released in 2002

At one point in *Changing Lanes* Gavin Banek comments to a bewildered priest that God must enjoy trapping two combatants in a bag and watching them "rip"; and later he reflects on the real significance of his day of combat: the life he could have had is gone, passed him by.

Perhaps *Changing Lanes* would have us see life as a series of (seemingly) random events that force a reaction. In such moments character is revealed. And the choices we make cannot be unmade.

It's not money that matters, but time.

Gavin is a charming cad, self-possessed and greedy. Doyle Gipson is anger-prone and thinks good intentions trump bad actions. During the course of a Good Friday they learn to overcome their predispositions. Each man has two advisors. Doyle has his ex-wife and his Alcoholics Anonymous sponsor. Gavin has his wife, Cynthia, and his mistress, Michelle. Their advice, sometimes well-meaning, makes little difference. This is a problem these men have to figure out for themselves. After Doyle (brilliantly) disables Gavin's car, then Gavin (diabolically) retaliates by luring Doyle into a trap that results in him getting arrested in front of his kids both men have had enough. With the sun gone and their anger spent, the two combatants reflect on this disaster. In Gavin's matter-of-fact talk about looking over a boat, we see that Doyle, his kids now bound for Oregon, has lost something of surpassing worth. Gavin, with his job intact and his wealth untouched, appears not to have suffered enough. But he has learned. He thought he'd made it. But now he knows that, despite being a partner at one of the premier Wall Street law firms, he's just the son-in-law. It's been decided that it is necessary that he be wealthy so the daughter will be 'taken care of.' Indeed, Gavin is just a lackey who got an old man to sign his life away. Partnership is the payoff for a dirty deed.

Doyle is much more stubborn, and slower to recognize the false assumption he operates under. It's only as the day ends that he begins to accept that he will suffer and others will prosper, that he'll never have a satisfactory answer as to why that happens. The anger he showed in the bar towards the racially insensitive (or were they innocuous?) comments of the two white men is now seen as counterproductive and self-defeating. He has learned, as the disadvantaged, not to tear down the moneyed, and Gavin, as the moneyed, has learned not to deprive the disadvantaged of charity, in the best sense of the word. It's not kindness through condescension, but love shown to an equal. He resolves to use his knowledge of the Power of Appointment to blackmail his father-in-law into returning his share of \$3 million stolen from Simon Dunn's estate, and to use their law firm's considerable clout to do genuine good, not the phony-good of p.r.-hyped playgrounds and youth orchestras that obscure tax shelters, offshore accounts, and court-file skullduggery.

Gavin thought everything could be bought with money, presuming that his offer to buy

Doyle a car would get his file back. This thoroughly offends Doyle, who refuses him, and then decides to return the file for no money at all! If Doyle wants to do something, he will do it for his own reasons, on his own terms. His alcohol use is repeatedly addressed during the film. He attends an AA meeting and worries his sponsor with his metaphor: "I don't *want* champagne, I *am* champagne." Doyle had already resolved to do right in all his actions, a conviction that frustrated Gavin at the scene of the accident. But his resolve is sorely tested by this day, and he falls back on old habits. It's a lot easier to handle a traffic accident than losing custody of one's children. But by refusing to drink he demonstrates incredible promise—he really can change.

Still, his ex-wife and his sponsor feel he is wildly self-congratulatory; it's not alcohol Doyle thrives on: he is "crazy, drunk or sober," and "addicted to chaos." He's finally seen what he's capable of. He almost killed a man. He *must* hold back.

Meanwhile Gavin is also learning how to live on the edge. He only repents of his vendetta once he sees the grief and fear demonstrated by Doyle's children. (Even private wars have collateral damage.) Like Doyle, his personal and legal issues are inexorably intertwined. Gavin's rapacious wife excuses adultery and fraud for the sake of high living, encouraging Gavin to open his eyes and quit being a Pollyanna. But at the film's conclusion he lets it be known that he's not going to live the way she wants. He'll live on the edge, but doing good, not evil, fighting his own partner and father-in-law to ensure that something decent results from the money stolen all these years. He disappointed Michelle, his ex-lover, by making his wife, his job, and his life the calculus of what is "right." He was willing to delude himself in order to maintain the status quo. But by film's end he decides to grow where he is planted.

Starting with getting Doyle a house for his family Gavin is going to live for others. Doyle couldn't do more than return a file. Gavin can do a lot more. His rough, profanity-spiced language at the dinner is revealing. He's done putting on an act, for social decorum is a poor mask for gross venality. And from this day forward, Gavin's life will be a little harder, and Doyle's a little easier.

Apart from the engrossing story, a critical component of the film's success stems from David Arnold's score. Significantly, it plays down the action (like the car wrecks) and emphasizes the dialogue, often dropping out just before a critical line. The score is very contemplative, the reverb-heavy synthetic textures, bathed in an atmosphere of regret rather than angst, perfectly match the cinematography and production design. Indeed, the weather is bleak and inhospitable. There are no themes, no flourishes to this score. The music anticipates the calm that will descend when the sun finally gives up and the two men agree to a cease-fire. There is no false comfort here...the mystery is what will happen on Saturday, and all the many days to come.

Also impressive is the editing, the story moving along very quickly, moments like the first car wreck presented in such a way that it's hard for us to know what is going on, which is precisely how the characters feel. And even as the story becomes more engrossing as one attack tops the previous, the file is still dwelled on (such as when Doyle is booked at the police station), just enough to let us think that if Gavin recovers the file then he wins. Slowly, we realize that the file just launches us into the action and symbolizes the corrosive agents eating

away at Gavin's soul. And then, in a great twist, by recovering the file, Gavin does win—not the fight against Doyle, but the fight against his father-in-law, the first of many battles to come.

As such, the last scene of Doyle reunited with his family obscures the film's message. Would it not be better to leave the film after Gavin's confrontation with his father-in-law? For at that point in the film we have learned that we must do right, even if there is no assurance that things will work out better because of it. We've learned that the ends do not justify the means, simply because we cannot say how things will end up! Doyle's reunion with his family is ironic, as it's doubtful that Doyle could have convinced the judge to rule in his favor even if he had been on time for the hearing. He's finally got a shot at a future, even after behaving abysmally. Both men have stared into the abyss and seen how their lives could collapse if they stayed true to themselves. They needed to change. That's why they may look back on the worst day of their lives as the best, a Good Friday indeed.