

## 21 - DVD

### Will it bring down the house?

by Neil Queen published on 5 September 2008

Maybe they thought that *A Beautiful Mind* would have been so much cooler if George Clooney had played the troubled maths genius. Or that all that was missing from *Ocean's 11* was a bit of complex theory.

Whatever the thinking, that's where we ended up with *21*. Based on the hmmm-sorta-real-though-~~quite-possibly-largely-made-up~~ book *Bringing Down The House*, *21* is one part rite-de-passage, one part *The OC*. As a model student who has ambitions for nothing more racy than going to Harvard Med school and whose prime skill is doing all sums and stuff, Ben (Sturgess) suddenly finds himself in a hedonistic world of limos, hooch and strippers that no geek should be permitted to enter.

That's because a canny Professor Rosa (Spacey) draws him into a Justice League of Preppy Card-Counters, a gang of grade-A students who apply cold arithma-logic to the game of blackjack, with the sole aim of creaming the casinos. Finally able to use his noggin for something other than nerdery, Ben takes flight as a high-rolling player - though only so he can pay for his Harvard tuition, or so he claims.

Of course, this being a truish story involving moral ambiguity, we have to have a come-uppance and life lesson, which all comes via casino watchman Cole (Fishburne) - a man with his own score to settle with Rosa, some forsaken buddies and a teacher who marks you down with something more noticable than a red pen.

No matter how many times you see it or how lame the real experience truly is, Vegas can always rub a bit of pixie dust on a project. While not exactly *Swingers* cool, it's hard not to feel a Ready Brek glow when you see hustlers in full flow. It's just a pity that *21* offers little else (bar a strong mixtape soundtrack that features the likes



...cont.

of MGMT and Mark Ronson). Without Spacey and Fishburne, the casting is tepid, though a one-dimensional script that recalls a script-writing for dummies template hardly helps.

Packing a few light moments into the first third only, mainly from Ben's Jack Black-lite frat buddy Miles, it soon settles into a procession of cardboard tropes and clichés, that given that this is supposedly based on a true story, don't wash. The editing is an exercise in savagery and the story arc isn't so much an arc as a Roman road, such is its bland directness. Seriously, you know when characters say stuff like "life couldn't get any better. What could possibly go wrong?" that you can safely pop to the loo and come back 10 minutes later without too much doubt about what has happened and what is going to happen.

## VERDICT

As I say, Vegas always makes for a vibrant setting, but maybe that's 21's pro and con. Take away the wolf's clothing of Vegas glamour and a coolhunter soundtrack and at its core the central theme - swot finds way of applying a talent that few of us are jealous of - is little but an exercise in beigeness.

An intriguing story, but replacing nuance with clichés robs 21 of any chance of being anything other than a fair piece of hangover fluff.

Rating: 12

Starring: Kevin Spacey, Laurence Fishburne, Jim Sturgess, Kate Bosworth

Directed by: Robert Luketic

Extras: Commentary, featurettes

---

## At a glance

### What is it?

Drama

### Good

Vegas, baby, Vegas

### Bad

Overly formulaic in too many ways to mention

### Verdict

An intriguing story, but replacing nuance with clichés robs 21 of any chance of being anything other than a fair piece of hangover fluff

**Price** 19.99 / £24.99 Blu-ray

**Our score**

**5/10**

**Your score**

**?/10**