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Narco-thriller 'The Line' hooks with dark appeal

12:00 AM CDT on Wednesday, September 9, 2009

By **CARY DARLING** / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

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The Line may be the first in line of its type: an underworld narco-thriller aimed at an American audience set amid the urban cacophony of contemporary Tijuana, not the usual backdrops of South Florida, Afghanistan or South America. One of nine films playing this week as part of the Latin-themed Maya Independent Film Series at the Magnolia, *The Line* – a flawed but darkly appealing cat-and-mouse game starring Ray Liotta, Andy Garcia and Esai Morales – won't be a trendsetter in the way *Miami Vice* was two decades ago but, minus the fashion sense, it feels as contemporary to our time as *Vice* did way back in the '80s.

Garcia is Javier Salazar, a drug kingpin who may be dying. He temporarily promotes his hothead lieutenant Pelon (Morales), a move that angers another of Salazar's henchmen, the suave but aptly named Diablo (Jordi Vilasuso). It also attracts the attention of American law enforcement, especially when Pelon invites two Afghan men involved in the drug trade to his home. Against Salazar's advice, he wants to give them exclusive access to "the line," the routes used to move huge amounts of drug traffic from Mexico into the United States.

Not only is Pelon angering his mentor, at least one of his colleagues and the Americans, he also seems to have a freelance bounty hunter (Liotta) on his tail, too. Finding out who, if anyone, is going to get the drop on Pelon is part of *The Line's* appeal. But no one's a hero here; everyone seems to have skeletons clanging in their closets, especially Liotta.

Directed and written, respectively, by the relatively inexperienced team of James Cotten and R. Ellis Frazier, *The Line* at times tries too hard to be important, and some of the dialogue is heavy-handed. And it's hardly realistic that, with the exception of some small talk and exclamations like "ayudame!," *The Line* should be mostly in English.

Still, by bringing into focus a world only sporadically glimpsed through the prism of TV news, *The Line* more than maintains interest. The Line

BStarring Ray Liotta, Andy Garcia, Esai Morales, Armand Assante, Danny Trejo and Bruce Davison. R (violence, sexual material, language and drug content). 95 mins. The Line screens at 7:30 p.m. today and 7:45 p.m. Thursday.

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- ▶ **7:00 pm, today:** Free Movie Night Series
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- ▶ **7:30 pm, tomorrow:** "The Black Monk" by David Rabe

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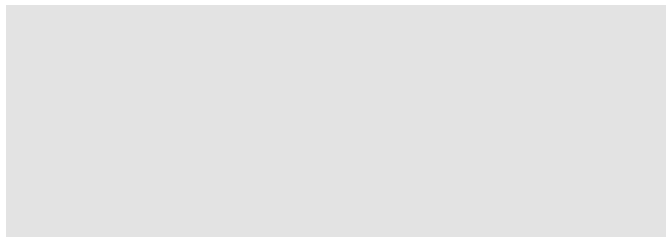
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