

A big moment in two movies

Actor Casey Affleck — Ben's brother — shines in 'Baby' and 'Jesse James' BY MICHAEL GILTZ

Life has never been better for actor Casey Affleck. He's got two critically acclaimed movies hitting theaters. His wife, Summer Phoenix (sister of late actor River), is pregnant with their second child. And there's even the animated movie he wrote, about a family of animals left behind by Noah's Ark, going into production.

Of course, the movies themselves are a little less sunny.

Affleck co-stars with Brad Pitt in the current release "The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford" (Pitt's James, Affleck is the coward), and on Friday comes "Gone, Baby, Gone," a drama directed by his brother, Ben.

Based on the novel by "Mystic River" author Dennis Lehane, "Baby" is a contemporary crime drama about a child's abduction and the swirling conspira-



Affleck as Old West killer (top); with Michelle Monaghan in "Gone, Baby, Gone."

cy around it, which involves a neglectful mom (Amy Ryan), piles of cash and a high-ranking official in the police force (Morgan Freeman). Ed Harris also stars.

The 32-year-old Affleck plays Patrick Kenzie, a Boston P.I. who prefers a smart remark to getting into scrapes, but is often bailed out of them by his capable partner Angie Gennaro (Michelle Monaghan). For Affleck — who has shone in supporting roles in movies including "Good Will Hunting" and "Ocean's Eleven" and its sequels, and has starred in quirky indie films like "Gerry" (with Matt Damon) and Steve Buscemi's "Lonesome Jim" — it's the first stab at leading-man glory and playing the

guy with the gun.

"Kenzie doesn't go looking for trouble," says Affleck, who first read Lehane's book when his dad sent him a copy, and never had an interest in playing the usual straight-arrow movie hero.

"I never thought of Kenzie as a thug or a brawler. The thing I love is that this is not your typical P.I. movie or film noir. There's always something about a private investigator that I love — they're really cerebral and disconnected and they're such cool characters. He's trying to put a puzzle together. Sometimes the audience is a little step ahead, and sometimes they're a little behind."

Affleck's friends and fellow actors tease him about being insecure and preferring to work from a state of unease.

At Cannes to promote their movie "Ocean's Thirteen," Matt Damon said, "Because Casey is so neurotic, I read the 'Jesse James' script about seven times. ... He would want to rehearse for his auditions over the phone. And we'd talk and talk and talk. Casey would talk for four hours. Honestly, I wouldn't say anything; he would just talk it through in his head. Then I'd finally say, 'Dude, I don't know what else to tell you!' Then he'd call up his brother and do the same thing for another four hours. He just really wanted that role."

Affleck laughs when hearing Damon's anecdote. "When I like something, when I get excited creatively, it's hard to turn my brain off," he admits. "It doesn't happen that often."

But he didn't feel any unease when working with his brother.

"I felt he was looking out for me and that was comforting," says Affleck, who first read the script for "Gone Baby Gone" when Ben brought it to him on the set of "Jesse James."

"Ben was carefully watching the performance, so that meant I could take risks and do whatever I wanted; that I could be 'bad,'" Affleck says. "Feeling like I could be bad is really liberating and helped me be better. I wanted to make sure that I'm good in it because I know [as a director] he'll go on to get better and better and do better and better movies. I think he's found one of his true callings." ♦