

Road to Perdition

Among the plethora of summertime movies that have been released since Memorial Day, few have been pitched at human beings older than 22 and with attention spans that can handle dialogue scenes of more than 30 seconds. One of this summer's truly "adult" features is *Road to Perdition*, riding into town with great expectations and numerous critical raves. The expectations were particularly fed by the top-of-the-line casting of Tom Hanks, as Irish hitman Michael Sullivan, and Paul Newman, as John Rooney, his father in all but blood, and the second film directing effort of Sam Mendes, so touted after his 1999 debut film *American Beauty*.

Let's give it this: *Perdition* is definitely earnest and meant to be weighty. Its story of a young boy, Michael Jr. (Tyler Hoechlin)--who finds out about his father's grim profession and thus reaps destruction on his own family--is sober and stolid, taking its own sweet time in telling its tale, and this is not meant as criticism. It is also beautifully mounted (1931 Illinois is evoked to the nth degree) and gorgeously photographed. Conrad L. Hall, one of the truly great Hollywood cinematographers (he won the Oscar shooting *American Beauty* for Mendes), achieves a moody look of amber and sea blue, as if the film has been dipped in the Depression's wintry past. The pace, sweep, and look of *Road to Perdition* cannot help but remind one of *The Godfathers*, only this time the hoods are Irish rather than Italian. Its stars acquit themselves well in a limited range, Newman as a nefarious charmer and Hanks as his laconic attendant. The acting prize, though, goes to young Hoechlin, a bright youth who sees his world shattered and who must become his father's sidekick as the two flee from their own mob.

So what doesn't convince? For one thing, the movie lacks a clear sense of place. The story happens in what appears to be an Illinois town called "Rockland" which--we gather--is some distance from Chicago (which is nicely recreated). An Irish "mafia" in the heartland? Since when? Some viewers may just go with the flow, but this reviewer needed the solidity of a real place when a real past was so carefully evoked. I expect this vague location stems from the film's source, a so-called "graphic novel" (i.e., adult comic book). And did I say the picture was earnest? Perhaps over-earnest. And occasionally overwrought. One lengthy slow-motion gunplay sequence (falling bodies with background music over muted gun fire) is meant to be balletic, but it comes off as overstaged and self-conscious.

Back to seriousness: Sam Mendes has directed a film he wants to be called a gangster epic and which he hopes will be in people's minds at award time. He is very serious, even calculating, about producing an "important" film. Go to *Perdition* (I don't mean that literally!) to appreciate a handsome effort, if not to be profoundly touched.

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