

## The Yards

A superficial description of *The Yards* --a gritty New York drama of personal treachery and political payoffs amid shady businessmen and ambitious punks--sounds oh so familiar. Yet another Mafioso melodrama or Harlem hell raiser, right? Not this time; in James Gray's new movie, we are in territory less ethnic and more subtle.

*The Yards* refers to the New York subway yards, where Frank Olchin (James Caan) sells electrical supplies in a business both legitimate and shady. It is where his wife's nephew, young Leo Handler (Mark Wahlberg) is offered a chance to work when he comes out of the slammer after taking the fall for his friends involved in an auto heist. No tough street kid, Leo is trying to better himself and help his ailing mother, Val (Ellen Burstyn). The best of his friends, Willie Gutierrez (Joaquin Phoenix), is already hustling in the yards, working political angles and applying muscle to make sure the right contracts are awarded. Leo has people rooting for him: his widowed mother, Val's sister and Frank's wife, Kitty (Faye Dunaway), and Willie's earnest girlfriend Erica (Charlize Theron), Kitty's daughter. Though Leo wants to do right, he gets involved, offhandedly, in an act of sabotage in those same yards where disaster strikes both for Willie, who kills a guard, and for Leo himself, who is forced into assaulting a cop. The cop, coming out of a coma, could identify his assailant so Leo either has to do him in or run for it, with both Willie and Frank now with motives for finishing him off.

This synopsis sounds routine for a crime drama, but the film avoids the usual stereotypes and the easy echoes of *The Godfather* series and its ilk. The world it depicts is rooted firmly in a specific lower middle-class life, its frustrations and its aspirations, and it shows no obvious ethnic overlay, other than Willie's Hispanic heritage.

The quality of *The Yards* comes in its superior execution. It offers a taut and gripping naturalism much aided by Gray's script, which he co-wrote with Matt Reeves. The dialogue is efficient and artless, which makes even basically inarticulate characters--like Leo--poignant in their attempts to communicate. The film is also enhanced by a painterly look--using much single-source lighting--and a potent, lugubrious (and occasionally intrusive) music score by veteran Howard Shore. The authentic settings, much of them in Queens, where Gray was born, range from run-down apartments to nouveau-riche homes. Its only routine element is the facile assumption of a malignant city government surrounding the yards.

Finally, it avoids the overweening or offhand violence that so many "crime" dramas--like the stylized *Sopranos*--trade in. The potential for violence is present in *The Yards*, of course, but it suggests the *menace* of violence more than its easy execution. It's that menace of what could happen that make some sequences--such as one where a terrified Leo is sent into the hospital to kill the wounded cop--so riveting.

The performers--to a person--are believable in their basic desires and complaints. The veteran actors, Dunaway, Burstyn and Caan, offer mature and complicated readings. Caan, particularly, is both a crook and a decent guy, a slick businessman with genuine family feeling. Young Theron as Erica is sympathetic and even soulful (though

I wonder if, even in Queens, they wear eye makeup that thick). Joaquin Phoenix, fresh off his *Gladiator* appearance this spring, is a very different cat this time, a striving Latino with hopes of moving up in class (by marrying Erica) who cannot avoid sliding into corruption. In an unsympathetic role, he earns about as much sympathy as is possible.

*The Yards* is, finally, Mark Wahlberg's picture. Wahlberg's acting range so far seems limited--I don't look forward to his doing period pieces or refined roles any time soon--but as a tentative, seeking big city kid he is right on target. His open-faced naivete, his halting desire to comprehend things bigger than himself were on display in films as diverse as *Boogie Nights*, *Three Kings*, and--just this summer--*The Perfect Storm*. Here he is mining that same vein again, very fruitfully, in acting so guileless that it hardly seems acting.

(*"The Yards"* is rated "R" for violence and language.)

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