

Lansky

The Hollywood mob story has a long and illustrious (and often seedy) history, from “Little Caesar” to “The Irishman,” with scads of crude B-pictures in between. “Lansky” is just the latest, but with a figure less known to the public. Not exactly a masterpiece, it dutifully fills in the blanks about one of America’s lesser-known, if important, criminal minds.

David Stone (Sam Worthington), a divorcee and down-on-his-luck novelist, gets the opportunity of a lifetime with a surprise call from infamous mob accountant Meyer Lansky (Harvey Keitel), offering Stone a chance “to tell you my life story” toward possibly publishing a biography. It’s 1981, and Lansky has long been living in Miami, where the interviews take place in a routine coffee shop.

For decades, law enforcement authorities have been trying to locate an alleged \$300 million fortune the mobster has spirited away before he quit the criminal life, and the FBI sees the Lansky interviews as their last chance to capture the aging boss of Murder Inc. and his stash before he dies.

The film’s screenplay (by director Eytan Rockaway) toggles between the Miami scenes and the life story of the poor but brilliant Jewish kid, Meyer (John Magaro) who teams up with the tough mug Bugsy Siegel (David Cade), the two eventually forming the brain and brawn of an ever-growing criminal enterprise based on casino gambling and extortion.

Overall, the flash-back story contains more energy and snap (some of it ending in brutal gun killings) than the more pedestrian interview sequences held in the coffee shop. While the back story sees the gradual development of a mob CFO, the more contemporary material seems wan in comparison, accentuating the sardonic philosophizing of the Old Man up against the naïve writer.

The 1981 scenes are also relatively tepid when compared to the historic ones. As much as we see the two fence over incident and language, no clear direction of Lansky’s career reveals itself, except one of facile enrichment. Stone, as depicted by the stiff Worthington, seems not only clueless, stuck in a nondescript motel room in the Miami boonies, but witless, as he laments his lost family, has a vapid affair, and generally whines about his fate. His character pales in comparison to the younger Meyer, played by the surly Magaro, a math whiz who helped sustain the mob’s criminal empire.

(The film is rated “R,” runs 119 minutes, and opened on digital services June 25th.)

(June 2021)