

The Irishman

It's been almost 20 years since Robert De Niro has worked with his buddy and mentor director Martin Scorsese (1995's "Casino"). It has taken that long for the two, after they both took an interest in the recent account of a mob hitman, to finally create "The Irishman," a crime epic that, in one sense, caps their careers so far.

"The Irishman" is based on Charles Brandt's non-fiction book "I Heard You Paint Houses" (the title is a sardonic euphemism for "decorating the walls with blood"). It chronicles the life of hitman Frank Sheeran (De Niro), a Philadelphia-based Teamster who comes under the tutelage of a local mob boss, Russel Bufalino (Joe Pesci), who eventually recommends him as a bodyguard for Jimmy Hoffa (Al Pacino), the union's long-time president.

Scorsese's intricate work, written by Steve Zaillian, is told in an extended arc through a leisurely runtime of 209 minutes, following its protagonist from his life as a young man through his active crime years to his last months as an old man in a retirement home. In fact, the film opens in 2003 with the aged Sheeran, wheelchair-bound in an assisted living facility, recalling his first connections to the crime world, an ongoing narrative that continues in over-voice throughout the picture.

Though the film has a kaleidoscope of scenes and themes, it is mostly told chronologically, with its core concentrating on the Hoffa years, the 1960's and 1970's, and incorporating multiple locations (though the actual shooting was all done in New York). A key extended sequence takes place in the summer of 1975, when the Sheerans and the Bufalinos undertake an apparently innocent car trip across the country, a sojourn given both off-handed and comic treatment. That trip culminates in both a Bufalino wedding and the most consequential hit of Frank's career.

Capping the film, and bringing it up to 2003, is an elegiac last 20 minutes, where we see the end of Sheeran's and Bufalino's lives as convicted prisoners, in gently comedic and poignant scenes, followed by Sheeran's last days in assisted living, rounding off this film where it began.

Scorsese is now 76 years old, and his handling of mob material this time around shows a delicacy absent from his earlier examinations of Wise Guys. For a mob movie, the violence is sparing; there are killings, but they are brisk and distanced, and thus perhaps closer to the real thing.

"The Irishman" is a most complex work, requiring him and his team to manipulate a variety of settings (especially Italian restaurants) and characters in a swirl of scenes, magnificently photographed throughout by

Rodrigo Prieto. Given the film's length and incidents, a massive and extraordinary cast is required, and most of the actors, even in small roles, are excellent. Female roles, it should be noted, are mostly marginal, and at times stereotypical (like the two harpy wives backseat driving in the road trip sequences), but this might be expected given the picture's ultimate macho-man vibe.

Among the leads, the revelation is Joe Pesci as Russell, this time a low-key, even modest mobster who never blows up, rarely utters oaths, and favors an ordinary, stress-free life. Di Niro had to coax old buddy Pesci out of retirement (he basically stopped making movies 20 years ago) to take on the role, and he made it his own. Who knew that Joe Pesci could do subtle?

Al Pacino as Hoffa is often incendiary and occasionally pensive but almost always blustery and hyped up. Though little seems done for him to resemble the Teamster boss (except his flat, slicked-back hair), he does display the barely-repressed energy of the man. Not surprisingly, though, he cannot get rid of the classic Pacino cadences.

De Niro, rightly, dominates the movie, but the role is not exactly dominating. If I have a fundamental problem with "The Irishman," it is that his character (more than his acting) is ***just not that interesting***. Fact is, he plays a coarse factotum--which means he is mostly inarticulate—and the script does him no favors. Nor is there anything particularly "Irish" about him. Time and again in myriad settings, he stumbles and grasps for what to say and says little. Accurate, perhaps, but not that noteworthy.

De Niro, with Scorsese's help, does have his moments, though. One stunner is one long take in a motel room, talking on the phone to Hoffa's wife Jo (the excellent Welker White). He has called to commiserate with her after the disappearance of her husband, which disappearance he has caused. A relentless semi-close-up of an embarrassed and guilty man, eyes closed and near to tears, is held for many minutes as Frank, in agony, tries to buck up his friend's wife with whispered clichés. For once in the film, his inarticulateness is perfectly appropriate.

(The film, available on Netflix, is rated "R" for language and violence and runs 209 minutes.)

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