

The Irishman 2019



Robert De Niro excels at playing closed-off, unreachable characters—hard men who might seem a bit dull if you met them for the first time, but have inner lives that they rarely let anyone see, and are mysteries to themselves. De Niro was 75 when he played yet another of those characters in Martin Scorsese’s “The Irishman,” which feels like a summation of a rich subset of De Niro’s long career.

Adapted by screenwriter Steve Zaillian (“Schindler’s List”) from Charles Brandt’s book *I Heard You Paint Houses*, and clocking in at three-and-a-half hours, the movie is an alternately sad, violent, and dryly funny biography of Frank Sheeran, a World War II combat veteran who became a Mafia hitman and then a union leader, and who had a long, at times politically fraught friendship with Teamster leader Jimmy Hoffa (Al Pacino). You feel every one of De Niro’s years in his haunting performance, as well as those of Pacino, Joe Pesci, and Harvey Keitel, who are “de-aged” for flashbacks via computer-generated imagery as well as analog makeup and hairpieces. You also feel the years in the mostly younger supporting cast (including Bobby Cannavale, Kathrine Narducci, Stephanie Kurtzuba, Gary Basaraba and Stephen Graham as gang bosses, spouses, and union leaders), who age forward.

And you feel them in Scorsese’s direction, which is more contemplative than his gangster movie norm (at times as meditative as his religious pictures), and which deftly shifts between eras, using dialogue and voice-over to make the time-jumps seamless. The frame-within-a-frame-within-a-frame structure is one of the most complex of Scorsese’s career. But it’s realized with such grace by Scorsese, Zaillian and longtime editor Thelma Schoonmaker that it never feels fussy or overdetermined, gliding from one thought-path to another as a recollecting mind juxtaposes the distant past, the recent past, and the present.

The opening shot glides through a retirement home, finding Frank sitting alone in a wheelchair. He’s such a rock-like presence that, seen from the back, he looks as if he could be dead. Then the

camera circles around to reveal his lined face, cloudy eyes, and white hair. He starts to speak. His statements become the film's narration. We don't know who he's telling this story to. Very late in the movie, we see him talking with a priest. But the audience is us, really.

The concluding half-hour—an immersion into this now-old man's life, fuller than we're used to seeing in any American film not directed by Clint Eastwood—provides a clarifying framework. This is a film about the intersection of crime and politics, Mafia history and Washington history. It touches on Fidel Castro's rise in Cuba and the CIA's attempts to overthrow him, President John F. Kennedy's assassination, and the mob wars of the 1960s and '70s. But it's mostly about age, loss, sin, regret, and how you can feel like a passive object swept along by history even if you played a role in shaping it. If Sheeran's account of his life is to be trusted (and many crime historians warn that it isn't), he was intimately involved in a handful of pivotal moments in American history. And yet we might still come away from "The Irishman" seeing him as a passive figure: the Zelig or Forrest Gump of gangsters—because of how he tells the story, as if he's in denial about what it meant and what it says about him.

Although he's capable of violence, and can mete it out on a moment's notice, Frank seems mostly content to hang in the backgrounds of Scorsese's wiseguy murals, behind louder, more eccentric men (especially Jimmy Hoffa, played with wit and gusto by Pacino, in hoarse-voiced, shouting-and-strutting mode). Frank is muted and reactive for the most part, and great at talking his way out of tight spots by pretending not to understand the questions being asked of him. He comes into several defining tasks and jobs by virtue of being in the right place or meeting the right people at the right time. As he describes his inexorable march through time and life, he characterizes choices that he made of his own free will (including several murders) as things that just happened to him.

This is not a seamless movie. Admirable as it is to see Scorsese committing to self-contained scenes that often unfurl like deadpan comedy sketches, the many digressions, marvelous as they are, come at the expense of fleshing out the canvas. And even at three-and-a-half hours, certain aspects feel undernourished. Major supporting players like Keitel (as Philadelphia crime boss Angelo Bruno), Cannavale (as Felix "Skinny Razor" DiTullio) and Ray Romano (as Teamster lawyer Bill Bufalino, whose daughter's wedding provides a pretext for Frank to take a car trip that literalizes the idea of life as a journey) all register as visual and emotional presences, especially when you first meet them. But it's not always easy to understand who they are as people, or what role they're playing in this narrative besides sharing space with the leads. (Pesci, who hasn't acted onscreen since Taylor Hackford's 2010 film "Love Ranch," makes a much stronger impression as Frank's mentor Russell Bufalino, boss of the Northeastern Pennsylvania-based Bufalino crime family; he's as quiet and controlled as his "GoodFellas" and "Casino" characters were obnoxious and volatile.)

The overwhelming maleness of the story also hurts it in the long run, notwithstanding the intentionality of this choice (the film is narrated entirely by Frank, and he's barely interested in life outside of his work in a world of men). As Russell's wife Carrie, Narducci has brilliant moments early on, mainly in car trip flashbacks, passive-aggressively hassling her husband to make Frank, the driver, pull over so she can smoke; but she becomes a non-presence after that. Kurtzuba (as Frank's wife Mary) and Anna Paquin (as the grown-up version of his daughter Peggy,

who saw many things she shouldn't have) are largely mute, almost ghostly presences. There's nothing innately unacceptable about stories focusing mainly on men (or women, as in the current "Hustlers"). But at the same time, I don't think it's a coincidence that Scorsese's two greatest Mafia pictures, "GoodFellas" and "Casino," carve out substantial space for wives, girlfriends, mothers and daughters, and feature indelible lead performances by actresses (respectively, Lorraine Bracco in "GoodFellas" and Sharon Stone in "Casino") that energize and transform the material, exploding the hero's lives like the bombs that roast vintage cars in "The Irishman."

As for the de-aging technology, it's not there yet. I don't think it's been there yet in any movie, though your mileage will vary. But if the results are sometimes distracting in "The Irishman," they're no more distracting than, say, then-fortysomething Pesci and De Niro in "Goodfellas" playing twenty-something versions of themselves. And Scorsese never gets too hung up on that kind of thing anyway—he's legendary for letting obvious continuity errors slide because he's more interested in continuity of tone and emotion—so here, as in his other epics, it's best to just roll with it.

All that having been said, anyone who worried that Scorsese was dipping into the Sunday gravy one too many times will be reassured by the tonal originality of what's been achieved here. More so than any other Scorsese crime picture—and this is saying a lot—"The Irishman" confirms him as one of the greatest living comedy directors who isn't described as such, and De Niro as one of the great scene-stealing straight men. His byplay with Pacino, Pesci, Keitel and all the rest is masterfully acted and edited by Schoonmaker. Much of it is a gangland "Who's on first?" routine, or the "Joey Scala/Joey Clams" exchange between Keitel and De Niro in "Mean Streets." Zaillian's script is filled to bursting with quotable lines. And every few minutes you get a marvelous bit of character-based comedy acting, such as Frank's blank-faced concentration as he plots their long car trip on a map with a red Sharpie marker, or a wild-eyed Hoffa glaring at a nemesis during a union awards banquet while sawing through a bloody steak.

The net effect is more unsettling and melancholia-inducing than you might have expected. Frank's storytelling aligns him with the most mesmerizing unreliable narrators in Scorsese's voice-over-heavy career. As in so many Scorsese films, what matters most is the relationship between this movie and its audience. It's about the difference between what the film shows us and how Frank describes it: the words and tone he chooses, and—most strikingly—what decides to gloss over, or present without comment.

How much agency, how much moral choice, how much say, do we truly have in our lives? Is a sin still a sin if we don't recognize the concept of sin, or lend credence the idea that some deeds are innately right and others innately wrong? Does it make sense to distinguish between murder and killing, or gangland mayhem and warfare as practiced by nations? Or are these just mental constructs designed by authority figures, meant to sanction acts approved by the state and condemn them when practiced outside its purview? Is Frank a sociopath who is a great killer because he doesn't feel emotions or have relationships in the way that most people do? (De Niro italicizes so little of Frank that we often don't know what Frank thinks of the things he does.) Or is it possible that violence, even killing/murder, is just one more type of activity, forbidden by rules of most societies, yet still widely practiced, and compatible with friendship, love, and loyalty? Are a

killer's tears at losing a friend or loved one counterfeit, a performance of grief? Is his smile on his wedding day a performance of love? And even if these are performances, what's the substantive difference between performing feelings and experiencing them? Is it different from deciding to become a soldier or a mobster, then being accepted as that thing, and eventually feeling as if you are that thing?

Scorsese, Zaillian and Schoonmaker don't answer these or other questions. By the time we reach the movie's detached and unfussy final image, we still aren't sure quite what to make of Frank, or this sprawling tale. And I don't believe we're supposed to. The movie expects us to complete it on our own by thinking back on it later, and discussing it with others. Scorsese is the last big-budget filmmaker who mostly declines to hand meaning to viewers. And in his crime films, he refuses to boldface why he's telling stories about self-serving criminals or assure us that he personally condemns them. "The Irishman" keeps with that tradition. The opportunity to sit with the movie later is the main reason to see it. For all its borderline-vaudevillian verbal humor and occasional eruptions of ultraviolence (often done in a single take, and shot from far away) it feels like as much of a collection of thought prompts and images of contemplation as Scorsese's somber religious epics "The Last Temptation of Christ," "Kundun," and "Silence."