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The Irishman Review: Death of a Goodfella

The Irishman is an American crime epic and elegy for Martin Scorsese, Robert De Niro, and Al Pacino's past work.



By [David Crow](#) | November 28, 2019 |

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It turns out wiseguys really can grow old. This fact of life has been obscured by both the violent ends of murdered mafiosos and the filmmakers who told their stories. Still, it remains a poignant reality for the characters in *The Irishman*—and the talent portraying it. Comprised of some of the greatest screen legends of their generation in front of and behind the camera,

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You know the type: you smiled at it in *Goodfellas* when De Niro, Pesci, and Ray Liotta introduced it with shiny shoes and daydreams of “always wanting to be a gangster.” That movie ended with Liotta’s Henry Hill finally dropping the inner-monologue and addressing the camera directly as he accepted he was a rat. De Niro’s Frank Sheeran begins *The Irishman* that way. No, he was never a rat (unless you count Sheeran allegedly taking credit on his deathbed for every major mob hit of the mid-20th century to author Charles Brandt). But De Niro’s Frank is old, decrepit, and all but forgotten when he’s introduced in a beautiful, classic Scorsese dolly shot during the opening sequence. Situated in a corner of a nursing home and ignored in his wheelchair, his voiceover turns into dialogue as he speaks to no one in particular, because there’s no one left alive who cares. He’s the anomaly, the mobster who made it to old age with a story 30 years past its sell by date. “I whacked Jimmy Hoffa.” Now it’s just fodder for Scorsese to reconsider the gangster again from the most advanced and wizened perspective.

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Frank's story spans decades and competing, parallel timelines. The primary one follows his rise from World War II veteran and truck driver to high-ranking officer in the International Brotherhood of Teamsters—Hoffa's union, a fact that the famed labor leader (played with predatory affability by Pacino) stresses repeatedly. Before Frank meets Jimmy though, he rises from his blue collar roots by being a go-to man for Russell Buffalino (Pesci), the head of a crime syndicate in Philadelphia and the greater Pennsylvania area. We watch Frank climb from enforcer to one who “paints houses,” a euphemism for the blood splatter left by shooting a person in the head.

While we only occasionally see Frank dabble in his oils, they're still full-blooded Scorsese set-pieces even before the unlucky parties begin begging and crawling away. But these moments aren't what Frank or his film are most interested in. Rather they are a means to ingratiate himself with a fellow Irish-American social climber: Jimmy Hoffa. Like Russell, Hoffa takes an instant shine to Frank, making him his muscle and then a Rust Belt lieutenant. Together they weather the decades, including wives and mistresses who pass like specters through their lives, nary making a noise onscreen. The same could be said for the background influence of presidents. The mafia's hopes for and then disillusionment with John F. Kennedy is thoroughly depicted, all while Frank fails to notice the growing chasm he is building between himself and his four daughters. They love Uncle Jimmy though—Frank does too, which makes the increased tensions between Hoffa and Frank's Sicilian associates increasingly awkward.

With its premiere at the New York Film Festival, there will be much made in the press about the historical accuracy of this film, or for that matter Brandt's even more sensational source material, *I Hear You Paint Houses*. While Scorsese and screenwriter Steven Zaillian are obviously taken with that provocative title (it's what *The Irishman* is credited as in the opening credits), neither is particularly intrigued with the accuracy of the real Sheeran's claims or the fuel he gave conspiracy theorists. This movie is not about the

Forrest Gump of hitmen. Rather it is an expansive, three and a half hour character study on an American life in crime, and the devastation it leaves behind.

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Admittedly, it does not need to be that long, even with editor Thelma Schoonmaker’s peerless cutting maintaining a remarkably light foot. Nor will some appreciate the digital de-aging technology Scorsese employed on all three of his leads (Frank spends a large section of the first hour in his 30s). In some of the darker lit scenes, it’s less noticeable, and in others De Niro and Pesci enjoy an uncanny resemblance to Tom Hanks in ***The Polar Express***. It is impossible to not be distracted in the first few minutes.

It’s a testament then to Scorsese’s storytelling that the film is so engrossing and persistently watchable that this problem is moot; a mild nuisance that can be ignored for the benefit of having these talents together. It is the first time Pacino has ever been in a Scorsese movie (though he and De Niro have an eclectic professional past), but it’s a long overdue reunion for the director, Pesci, and De Niro who’ve let a quarter-century slip by since ***Casino***. The digital tech allows for a weird trick where actors who once played brothers now have a father-son relationship, but what is more useful is the baggage they carry into this particular

experience.

Scorsese knowingly pulls not only from his own filmography but alludes and references many of his stars' greatest hits, be it Pacino's stint in *The Godfather* or De Niro's own mythic silhouette of the corrupted American dream in the sequel. He knows the effect all three actors, as well as himself, have had on how we perceive American cinema and some of its most celebrated felons. Yet there is nothing celebratory here. Thirteen years removed from the still manic swagger of *The Departed*, all three actors here play it mostly middle-aged and thoughtful, absent the showiness of a Tommy DeVito or Tony Montana. Pesci particularly plays against type in a subtly trenchant performance of quiet certitude. Pacino meanwhile gives his best screen turn in more than a decade with his high-pitched cadence and ingratiating oiliness.

You don't want to see these guys ever have a falling out, even as it's inevitable. While the language is much less combative than earlier Scorsese films—other than a Mamet-esque scene for Pacino to chew—Zaillian finds a tragedy of manners in their tribalism. To hear one man in this world tell another he is “a little concerned” is an alarm bell; to hear yet one more say “it is what it is” might as well come with a bullet to go along with the death threat. There are also several scenes of Pesci or De Niro threatening shopkeepers with a smile and compliment, as if they were a corrupt president on the

phone with Ukraine.

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But none of it has the kind of immediate charm in the long view that youth afforded Henry Hill, Travis Bickle, or even Scorsese at an earlier age. The filmmaker mimics here a shot he and Schoomaker believe to be his most violent—when Henry beats up a predatory neighbor in *Goodfellas* during a real-time wide shot. But in *The Irishman*, it is told from the vantage of Frank's six-year-old daughter when he smashes a creepy grocer's hand. At nearly four hours, we will have time to live with the ramifications of that event long after she's grown up and moved out.

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The Irishman returns to many of the themes and flourishes that this company thoroughly tread in the past. And at such a lengthy running time, it cannot help but be somewhat ponderous. If you find it indulgent though, then please let us indulge the filmmakers who have much to share about the wasted lives Frank

Sheeran left in his wake, and what an epic tragedy it is to watch the waste of his own in this profound elegy.

***The Irishman** premiered at NYFF on Sept. 27. It opens in limited release on Nov. 1 and premieres on Netflix on Nov. 27.*

David Crow is the Film Section Editor at Den of Geek. He's also a member of the Online Film Critics Society. Read more of his work here. You can follow him on Twitter @DCrowsNest.

Rating:

★★★★☆ 4.5 out of 5

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