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REEL WORLD



Confessions of a hitman

Scorsese reunites with old friends for mobster epic

After a lot of publicity surrounding the digital de-aging of its stars and a very brief theatrical run, Martin Scorsese's *The Irishman* has arrived on Netflix, and it is a very good offering from the accomplished auteur. It has a few problems, but the opportunity to see the likes of Robert De Niro, Al Pacino and Joe Pesci together under the Great One's direction more than overrides any of the movie's shortfalls.

by
Bob Grimm

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The Irishman
 Starring Robert De Niro, Joe Pesci and Al Pacino. Directed by Martin Scorsese. Netflix. Rated R.

The film is based on Charles Brandt's book about Frank "The Irishman" Sheeran called *I Heard You Paint Houses* ("paint houses" being a euphemism for "murder people"). Sheeran (played by De Niro) was a labor union leader and purported hitman who had ties to Jimmy Hoffa (Pacino), as well as the Bufalino crime family of Pennsylvania, and the film begins at the end of his life as he sits in a wheelchair in a nursing home and starts to tell his story.

That story, about a World War II vet who goes from meat-truck-driving working stiff to cold-blooded killer-for-hire/Teamsters tough guy, covers a long time span. We see Sheeran from his 30s up until shortly before his death in his 80s. All ages of the character are played by De Niro, and the much-ballyhooed digital de-aging of him, Pacino and Pesci—all of whom are in their 70s—is mostly a bust. There are moments when De Niro looks somewhat younger than his 74 years (at the time of filming), but it often looks like bad makeup, dye jobs or funky lighting rather than the result of meticulous high-tech effects. Distracting visuals aside, the three great actors are priceless in their parts.

Scorsese has made a nice companion piece to his gangster epic *Goodfellas*, another ugly depiction of the loneliness and alienation that results from a life spent doing things like shooting people in the head. While the 1990 film had a rather likable and unintentionally funny antihero in Ray Liotta's portrayal of wiseguy-turned-rat Henry Hill, none of the main guys in this movie are very likable, especially Sheeran. De Niro depicts him as a meathead, a lackey who takes orders from both crime boss Russell Bufalino (Pesci) and infamous Teamsters leader Hoffa. Sheeran provides few excuses for even uncomfortable laughter; he is quietly despicable throughout most of the film.

Pacino is the most fun as a blustering, ice-cream-obsessed Hoffa. His character is also the angriest guy in the movie, and Pacino sinks his teeth into every opportunity to go from zero to 100 in seconds. He shares a couple of scenes with Stephen Graham as Anthony "Tony Pro" Provenzano—a capo in the Genovese crime family and one of the suspects in Hoffa's eventual disappearance in 1975. Pacino and Graham square off more than once, and the results are vintage Pacino and among the best scenes in the 3 1/2-hour-long running time.

Like the rest of the film, the ending is based on Sheeran's own deathbed interviews, and while the historical accuracy of his claims have been questioned by many, it's nonetheless a fine finale.

For Scorsese fans, seeing De Niro and Pesci sharing scenes again—talking Italian and dipping bread in wine—is a cinematic gift for the holiday season. It's De Niro's best work in years, and Pesci gets a chance to play a more subdued character than usual. His Bufalino (aka "the Quiet Don") is a soft-spoken, polite, yet extremely dangerous man, and that underlying tension is mesmerizing. □