WHERE HAVE ALL

Overreliance on formula dampens The Irishman’s scant innovations

By Georgia Hampton

When I think about Martin Scorsese’s 2019 mafia epic “The Irishman,” my mind goes over the first three hours and lands on a moment roughly 90 minutes before the film’s conclusion. By this point, viewers have already been reunited with the well-trodden greatest hits of organised crime, familiar to any viewer who has seen “GoodFellas” or “Casino.” The film’s last half hour does so with a familiar formula, trading in for something decidedly quieter and darker. In this scene, the film’s central protagonist Frank “The Irishman” Sheeran (Robert De Niro) is an old man living a ordinary life in a nursing home. He is in awe of the only living person left with any connection to the mysterious death of Jimmy Hoffa, a topic on which Frank remains unwaveringly tight lipped, even in his old age.

The scene is unconnected with the splashy details of that infamous disappearance. Here, Frank meets with his now-adult daughter Irene (Stephanie Kazmarick) with the intention of asking for her help in reconnecting with his other daughter Peggie (played by the criminally undeserved Oscar winner Anna Paquin). Peggie has refused to speak to her father ever since Jimmy Hoffa’s disappearance, which she is thoughtfully constrained her father carried out.

Irene pushes Frank to explain why she so desperately wants to “just talk” with Peggie, finally causing Frank to stumble through the admission that he wasn’t a good father to his two children. “I was just trying to protect her, protect all of you,” he says, as Irene begins to cry. “You had a very sheltered life, in a way, because you didn’t see what I saw.” Scuffling, Irene tells her father, “You have no idea what it was like for me.”

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This moment, set those in the 90 minutes that follow, could have made “The Irishman” a spectacular film. Gone was the flashbacks that I have come to expect from Scorsese’s mafia films — protagonist as narrator, hysterical woman, a man with fingernails expressively eating a bloody steak, M太多了 music. The film’s final moments do away with the dated presence of music, of montage, of Scorsese’s unique brand of violence-tinged clockwork, lingering instead in the mundane. We watch as a much older Frank stumbles around in a humdrum resignation to his lonely life. Frank is confronted once and even again with the fruits of his wiseguy lifestyle: complete and total obsolescence.

That’s the problem. To get to these delicate moments, viewers have to slog through three hours of the same old story.

There is hardly a mafia myth more tarnished than the mystery surrounding Jimmy Hoffa. In the Metro Detroit area, Jimmy Hoffa is as good a ghost story as any other. I grew up five minutes away from the location of his last known sighting — the Andersonian on Maple and Telegraph in Bloomfield, Michigan, known as the Red Box when Hoffa visited. I still delight in sharing this minor piece of mob trivia to a cast of wide-eyed friends: “That’s where Jimmy Hoffa disappeared!”

Hoffa is a story so saturated with theories and conspiracies that it’s practically begging to be deconstructed, made unceremonious. Someone based “The Irishman” off Charles Brand’s sensational nonfiction book “I Hear You Punch Houses,” telling the story of Hoffa’s disappearance through Sheeran, a mob hitman whose own indoctrination into organised crime led him to Hoffa.

The film unloads within the standard Scorsese mob thin film but promises a twist. It follows the doomed wiseguy beyond his inevitable prison term all the way to the running home. In a longform tracking shot that mirrors “GoodFellas,” the film sets this tone in the

THE WISEGUYS GONE?

first scene as the camera glides through the desolate angular scaffolding of an abandoned living library in the wearying course of “The Irish at the Night” by Tom Robbins.

It’s here that we first meet Frank, ancient and alone. It’s from this location that he tells his story in extended flashback. As a viewer, you know you will eventually return here; the concessions of time are at the forefront of “The Irishman.” Here is the glorious arc of Frank’s memory, any new wiseguy is introduced with an explanation, a subtle flavor briefly quenches linking the date and method of their otherwise violent death.

Selling a story as a reflection of Hoffa’s makes for a film in which death is always at the forefront, always coming, but invariably the inevitability of death; the feeling that mimics — it is not well after the climactic moment in which Hoffa dies. The real story, as Scorsese himself has confirmed, exists in Frank’s sentencing: “It’s all about the final act,” he relayed to The New York Times. “It’s the last act.” I think it’s fair to agree; this is the end story begging to be told through “The Irishman.” But “The Irishman” ultimately comes across as two warning films — the familiar, murky wiseguy story that is Hoffa’s life has been made since “Goodfellas,” and the now interesting story of misplaced heroism and inauspicious efforts.

What “The Irishman” fails to do is to do anything that you perceive-defined director more attempt to do without from the formula that has worked so many times before. The story of Jimmy Hoffa is a rich vein for Scorsese’s signature style, and it can hardly choke him for leaning on the styling of that same formula. Yet it comes at the sacrifice of a much more interesting story, one that Scorsese himself seemed to believe he was telling. I can’t imagine that this is the last we’ve seen of Scorsese’s mafia bifurcation, but I hope that this is a step, if a slender one, away from the “Goodfellas” formula into something different. That might be too much to ask.

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