

DVD Select: Martin Scorsese is back on the mean streets with 'Departed'

by Robert J. Hawkins

As I watched Martin Scorsese's exuberantly violent remake "The Departed" (Warner Home Video, 3 1/2 stars) the other night, I had the eerie feeling I'd seen this all before recently.

No, it was not the original Chinese action blood fest "Infernal Affairs" (Miramax/Genius) - which by the way has been reissued as a box set with "Infernal Affairs" 2 and 3.

No, it was something else.

'THE DEPARTED' - Jack Nicholson and Leonard DiCaprio get ready for a meeting with the mob in the a scene from the crime drama 'The Departed.' CNS Photo courtesy of Columbia Pictures. Here is this cops and mobsters story, set in Boston, where Irish Catholic mobs are at war with Italian Catholic mobs. The police and state troopers are at war with the mobs. Everybody seems to have rats infiltrated into the other side. The FBI is in bed with top mobsters. Top mobsters rule their neighborhoods like high priests. Betrayal is death. Stupidity is death. Failure is death. Death comes from any direction and for any reason. People are assassinated. Cars are blown up. Houses are torched. The city is a war zone, divided along racial lines.

Wait. Now I remember where I've seen this story played out before. On the evening news: Baghdad.

"The Departed" is really the war in Iraq in Boston.

Instead of Muslim factions, Boston has Catholic ones (Irish, Italian, Puerto Rican) ... and non-Catholic groups, (black Americans). They run their neighborhoods and loyalty is to the local mob chief - who can protect you - rather than to the cops - who are either dirty or can't protect you.

Frank Costello (Jack Nicholson) is the Irish Muqtada al-Sadr of Boston. He rules his Southie neighborhood with an iron fist. He knows everybody and everybody's business. He recruits little kids in the proverbial candy store to run numbers and grooms them into adult killers. Some, like little Colin Sullivan (Matt Damon) grow up to become state troopers - where they provide Frank with up-to-the-minute information that will keep him out of jail. Colin Sullivan is a rat on the inside.

Billy Costigan (Leonardo DiCaprio) is a bit more complicated. He had a Southie mother and a Brahmin stepfather. He was shanty Irish poor and First Families rich. He grew up with a high IQ and a hatred of the wealthy class. Before Billy made it through trooper boot camp, he was spotted as a ringer.

Billy gets recruited by the closet guys in internal affairs, the genteel Oliver Queenan (Martin Sheen) and his street-bred assistant Dignam (Mark Wahlberg). They want him to bail on cop school, pick a fight and do four months in prison. With this impeccable record, he's bait for Costello's mob.

For reasons only an analyst could love, Billy takes the assignment.

With the pawns in place, an amazing game ensues. Can the crime task force bust up Costello's operation before Billy is fish bait in the Charles River? Can Billy learn the identity of Frank's rat in the state troopers before he's ratted out himself? Can Costello get any more outrageously violent before somebody plants lead in his brain? Will Billy and Colin learn that, unknowingly, they are bedding down the same police psychologist, Madolyn (Vera Farmiga), a sweet girl clearly in the wrong line of business?

All good questions.

Your stomach muscles are twisted like a pretzel before the answers appear. If I told you who is left standing at the end of the movie of all the people I've mentioned so far, well, you wouldn't believe me.

It is that bloody (worse, actually) but it is also that good.

"The Departed" is up for five Oscars - director, editing, best picture, writing and supporting actor (Wahlberg) - and deservedly so. Boston film critics recognized the movie in all of these categories (except editing). They like hometown Southie son Wahlberg. Scorsese picked up the Golden Globe for directing, too. The two-disc DVD offers nine additional scenes with an introduction by Scorsese, a Turner Classic Movie channel profile on Scorsese, a documentary on the Boston mob and the character on whom Nicholson's character is modeled and a documentary on how Scorsese's work is influenced by the mob he grew up with in New York's Little Italy.

ALSO THIS WEEK

"School for Scoundrels" (Genius, 2 stars) Dr. P (Billy Bob Thornton) builds confidence in losers like traffic cop Roger (Jon Heder) - mainly through sadistic exercises that prove far more painful than, say, asking a girl out. Trouble is, both Thornton and Dr. P want to ask the same girl out, Amanda (Jacinda Barrett). Can the student best the teacher and win the prize? Just watch.

"Marie Antoinette" (Sony, 2 stars) A Californian looks at the court of 18th century Versailles through the youthful eyes of Marie Antoinette, a mere child who eventually becomes the bride of Louis XVI. The Californian is director Sofia Coppola, who hardly ever lets the lens stray far from the comely and well-draped Kirsten Dunst as the fateful Marie. If you think Coppola is a visionary or you are a complete fashion wonk, this movie is for you. If you think "Lost in Translation" (aka "Sleepless in Tokyo") was a crashing bore, you won't think much more highly of this period piece.

"ZOOM: Academy for Superheroes" (Sony, 1 star) For this, Tim Allen should do nothing but voice-overs for computer animated feature films for the next two years.

Also this week: misunderstood thriller "The Quiet"; Ben Affleck's cross to bear "Man About Town"; sci-fi with dueling robots in "Android Apocalypse"; coming of age comedy "Samoan Wedding"; a Mongolian child defies her father who refuses to take in a stray dog in the lovely "The Cave of the Yellow Dog."

Documentaries: "The U.S. vs. John Lennon" - when the ex-Beatle spoke out against the war in Vietnam, the government made it clear he was no longer welcome in this country. His court battle to stay in this country went on for years, as only a man of wealth could afford to do. In the end, John won. The film also follows his growth and maturing as a musician, father, husband, activist and fool on a hill. Nicely done.

"... So Goes the Nation" (Genius) looks at how leaders are chosen and how the choosers are manipulated.

IT CAME FROM TV

Season one of the classic chick series "Beauty and the Beast" with Linda Hamilton and the man-beast Ron Perlman. Also, "Zoey 101 (season one); "Hustle" (season two); "All in the Family" (season six); "The Hills" (season one); and "The Golden Girls" (season seven).

FROM THE VAULTS

"Tom Hanks: Comedy Favorites Collection" (Universal) Three of his least-funny films, amazingly enough: "The Money Pit," "The 'Burbs" and "Dragnet."

"Steve Martin: The Wild and Crazy Comedy Collection" (Universal) You'll have to decide just how funny

versus annoying these films are - "The Jerk," "Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid" and "The Lonely Guy."

DVD RATINGS

4 stars: Don't miss: rent it/buy it

3 stars: Worth the risk: rent it

2 stars: On the tipping point: if nothing else is available

1 star: Don't bother: wait until it's in the \$1 bin

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