

Movie Review: 'We Own The Night'

by David_Elliott

"The Godfather" looms like a stern, judging father over almost every American crime film and TV cop or mob show since 1972. The young writer and director James Gray is, at least, bluntly frank about his debt.

'WE OWN THE NIGHT' - Joaquin Phoenix and Mark Wahlberg star as two brothers on a collision course in the crime drama 'We Own the Night,' the latest film in director James Gray's crime-family series, following 'Little Odessa' and 'The Yards.' CNS Photo courtesy of Sony Pictures. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) With "We Own the Night," Gray finishes a New York crime trilogy begun with "Little Odessa" (1994) and followed by "The Yards" (2000). He even brings back the buddy leads of that second film to play the Grusinsky brothers, Joseph (Mark Wahlberg) and Bobby (Joaquin Phoenix).

Joe, who has followed in his revered dad's work in the NYPD, is clearly a Polish-American variant on Al Pacino's dutiful Michael Corleone. Bobby, who changed Grusinsky to Green and manages the party life in a

dance, drink and (covertly) drug club in a former Brooklyn movie palace, is a volatile cocktail mix of Sonny and Fredo Corleone.

What, no godfather? Yep, two: a creaky Russian mobster who hires Bobby to run the club, and "Godfather" totem Robert Duvall as police patriarch Burt Grusinsky. Duvall looks old, but can still dominate with his steel-clamp voice and savvy, lie-detector eyes.

The rather simple story, more on the level of a good episode of "The Sopranos" than the "Godfather" epic, tells how foolishly wayward Bobby is lured back into the family after his brother is hit (not fatally) by Russian drug thugs. Used undercover, Bobby becomes a cop the hard way, while lover Amada (Eva Mendes) follows like a bewildered party balloon.

It's a bit weird to watch Duvall doing echoes from his Tom Hagen in the '70s "Godfather" movies, but with croaky touches of Brando, while Phoenix does less a James Caan update than his own hunkier Brando touches back to "On the Waterfront." The movie is clotted with derivation, including some dialogue and action rhythms patented by Martin Scorsese's crime films.

To his credit, Gray is very good with actor tensions (some from old pro Tony Musante) and can stage a terrific action blast. You wouldn't think, 36 years after "The French Connection," that a violent New York car chase could be so freshly exciting, but Gray stages one in the rain that is a nerve-thrasher.

Still, the main villain (Alex Veadov) is from the TV file of Slavic creeps. There is meager effort to explore why Bobby left his family for opposing values. Wahlberg is mostly sidelined. And the heavy finish is as solemn as a Bach cantata.

Gray has made his tough NYC trilogy, yet he doesn't have a "Godfather." But then, on the third attempt, neither did Francis Coppola.

A Columbia Pictures release. Director, writer: James Gray. Cast: Robert Duvall, Joaquin Phoenix, Mark Wahlberg, Eva Mendes, Alex Veadov. Running time: 1 hour, 49 minutes. Rated R. 2 1/2 Stars.

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