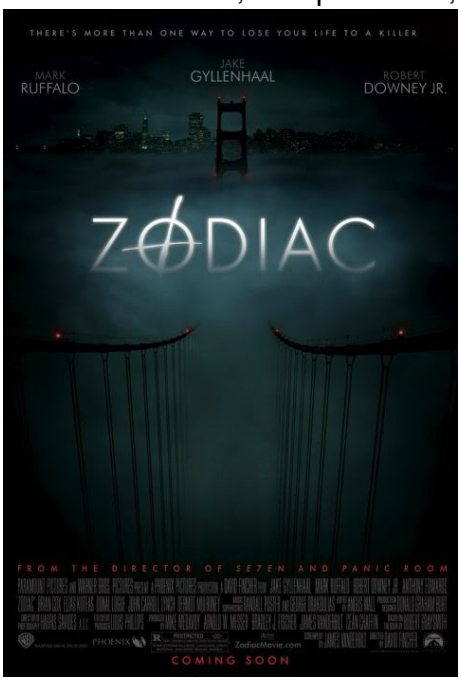
I can't wait to see this flick. Finally, the story of the infamous Bay Area serial killer from the late sixties and early seventies comes to the silver screen. And it's directed by David Fincher, who brought us "Se7en" and "Fight Club" ... two other phenomenal films. Mitch was at the theater the first night it came out to see this one, and per usual, delivers an excellent review of this highly hyped new film.



Starting in 1969, a serial killer who called himself “The Zodiac” terrorized the San Francisco area, sending numerous taunting letters and strange codes to newspapers, particularly the San Francisco Chronicle, detailing his gruesome attacks, and threatening even more horrors. These letters continued on and off for several years before finally stopping, and the identity of the killer has never been verified.

In David Fincher’s new film on the subject, the director adds style and suspense to what is basically a procedural drama focusing on two groups investigating the murders; the police detectives and the reporters from the Chronicle. The result is a fascinating look into not just the actual events, but also how pieces came together, how clues fell through the cracks, and the effects the case had on those involved with trying to solve it.

The initial spotlight is on Chronicle reporter Paul Avery, played to near perfection by Robert Downey, Jr. Avery is a cross between Bob Woodward and Hunter S. Thompson, a fiercely dedicated and intelligent journalist who is nonetheless hindered by his own addictions to drugs and alcohol. He is the first to recognize Zodiac as an egotistical maniac, and his articles depicting the killer as a latent homosexual, pervert, and inadequate human being soon put him

at risk from the killer. Other reporters take to wearing buttons stating “I’m not Avery” in a dark joke after Avery is threatened by Zodiac. In reality, the extra publicity probably pleased Zodiac, and he later sent information to Avery that led to the discovery of another possible murder victim in Riverside (it was never verified that the woman was killed by Zodiac, however).

Downey’s characterization is said to be an almost re-incarnation of the actual writer, according to those that knew Avery. Not the physical resemblance, as Avery was tall and blonde, but the mannerisms, voice, and actions were said to be spot on. Even without knowing that fact, you can’t help but be mesmerized by Downey’s portrayal. He has always been an exceptional actor, but his own personal demons have derailed him numerous times. One would wonder if playing such a kindred soul was cathartic to Downey, or extremely difficult. In any case, it is one of the best performances I’ve seen from him in many years.

Constantly butting heads with Avery are the two SFPD detectives in charge of the investigation, David Toschi (Mark Ruffalo) and William Armstrong (Anthony Edwards). They are the first inspectors on the scene for what seems to be a random killing of a cab driver in downtown San Francisco. Within days, they are informed that the killing is connected to the other Zodiac murders after they receive a bloody swath from the cabbie’s shirt. From there, they try to put the pieces of the puzzle together by working often with law enforcement officers from the jurisdictions of the other crimes, well represented by Elias Koteas and Donal Logue.

Ruffalo gets the meatier of the two roles as Toschi, and you can plainly see the frustration grow as the trail gets colder and more dead ends appear. Edwards gets the more thankless role as the supportive, rational partner, but it is still good to see the former Dr. Mark Greene in a major dramatic role.

A little over halfway through the movie, the focus shifts to Chronicle cartoonist Robert Graysmith, played by Jake Gyllenhaal. During the first part of the movie, Graysmith is more of a peripheral character, as if we’re seeing the other major characters through his eyes. A self proclaimed Boy Scout, Graysmith hovers about Avery, fascinated with solving the cryptograms and learning more about the case. Later, Graysmith takes a leave of absence from the paper to do his own research for his own book, which of course is the basis for this movie.

Much of the movie is concerned with the cost this case had on three of the men; Toschi, Avery, and Graysmith. Avery's self destruction may be more due to the drugs and booze than the Zodiac, but the case certainly added excessive strain to a man barely holding on to begin with. Toschi's obsession also extracts a heavy price on his career, as he is accused at one point of forging a Zodiac letter just to gain attention. Eventually Armstrong wisely steps away from the pressure and requests a transfer outside of homicide, a choice Toschi should have considered.

But it is Graysmith who may have lost the most, as his fixation on the case eventually impacted his job and his family. Early on in the film, we see a dedicated single father doting on his six year old son while trying to get a relationship with his new girlfriend Melanie off the ground (Chloe Sevigny). As the years go by (the movie covers the time period between 1969 and 1978 for the main characters), he has married Melanie and they have had two other children. But they all start to take a back seat to his research on the unsolved killings. Gyllenhaal does an extraordinary job in making the transformation believable, while keeping the good in Graysmith apparent despite the mistakes he is making in his life.

If this all sounds like "All the President's Men", or something you'd see each week in any network forensic crime drama, you'd be right. What separates this from that type of mystery is the work of Mr. Fincher, who has added the same touches he used so brilliantly in "Se7en" and "Fight Club" to create a movie that is just as much of a thriller as it is a standard crime drama. The depictions of the actual murders are visceral, disconcerting and are as shocking as anything you saw in "Se7en"; more so due to the fact that you know Fincher is recreating an actual event.

He also captured the mood and looks of the period extremely well; from the music to the clothing and (horrible) hair-styles. In doing so, he also rams home something that just seems so strange now given life in the Computer Age...that being the disconnect and lack of communications between law enforcement agencies less than an hour's drive from one another. We have become so used to seeing all the high tech gadgets on CSI and other shows that we can forget that things were much different not so long ago. And those gaps in technology and communication may well be why the murder is considered unsolved.

I say considered because there is definitely a sense of closure in this movie that I wasn't sure could happen given the "official" line on the case. Graysmith's book was/is extremely controversial, as he provides evidence as to the identity of the man he believes was the Zodiac. Fincher keeps the mystery going throughout the movie, so we actually have what feels to be a resolution as Graysmith and Toschi continue to look to solve the case, and do come up with what looks to be a definitive answer as to who was responsible.

The major problem I have with the movie is in its length, as it clocks in at two hours and forty minutes. There was easily thirty minutes of material that could/should have been trimmed, which would have made it much more palatable. But there were a lot of scenes that were left in to provide more depth regarding the characters...with the result being that quite often the sense of dread and anticipation regarding the crimes ground to a near halt. And then later in the movie Fincher tried to re-create the suspense by showing Graysmith "in danger", something that wasn't believable at all as you knew he was to go on and write the book.

All in all, however, the best movie of this young year, one that I definitely recommend to any mystery fan, crime story junkie (like my wife), or fan of exceptional acting and directing.

My Rating: Frank Ryan (3 footballs). Trim the 30 excessive minutes, and it would be a 3 ½.

Review Key:

Otto Graham: Over 4 Footballs. HOF quality movie

Bernie Kosar: 4 Footballs. Excellent

Brian Sipe: 3 ½ Footballs. Very Good

Frank Ryan: 3 Footballs. Good, solid film.

Bill Nelsen: 2 ½ Footballs. OK. Worth seeing at the theater.

Kelly Holcomb: 2 Footballs. Disappointingly inconsistent but some bright spots. Rent it on DVD.

Tim Couch: 1 ½ Footballs. Poor. Had potential, but lack of support led to an overall stinker.

Jeff Garcia: 1 Football. Horrible. All hype; no performance.

Mike Phipps: ½ Football. “We gave away Paul Warfield for THIS?” level of suck

Spergeon Wynn: No Footballs. UberSuckitude personified.

Charlie Frye: Incomplete.