To me, the sign of a great artist is to see one who, while already at the top of his game, stretches himself to try something entirely different. Martin Scorsese finally reached the pinnacle of his profession three years ago with the superlative film “The Departed”, another riveting look at the seedy underworld of organized crime in America.

Coming off that success, Scorsese could make any kind of movie he wanted, so he decided to channel his inner Alfred Hitchcock, giving us “Shutter Island”, a dark, intense, and disturbing psychological thriller that would make the Grand Master Hitchcock proud. In the long run, it won’t even rate in Scorsese’s top five films, but there is nothing wrong with going out on a limb to make something that is both different and familiar, and to do so with such a keen eye for the details

The film is all about tone, shot almost as film noir, and Scorsese sets it right off the bat, with ominous music playing a bit too loud as we first see U.S. Marshall Teddy Daniels hunched over a toilet. He is on a ferry to the brooding Shutter Island, a prison/hospital facility for the criminally insane, a place where only the worst offenders are kept, a New England Alcatraz where escape from the island is impossible.

Or so they thought. One of the prisoners/patients has gone missing, a young woman named Rachel who is in the facility after drowning her three children. Teddy and his new partner Chuck Aule (Mark Ruffalo) have been summoned to investigate this seemingly impossible act, and they learn right away that Shutter Island is like no other place they have ever been.

They are escorted around the island by Deputy Warden McPherson, played by John Carroll Lynch (who played Drew Carey's brother in the TV show), a genial but threatening bureaucrat who immediately sets the tone of things being off-kilter on the island. He takes them to meet the chief medical officer of the hospital, Dr. Cawley (Ben Kingsley), an obviously brilliant man, but one who seems a bit on edge at all times, as if he is hiding something. More sinister is Dr. Cawley's partner Dr. Naehring (Max von Sydow), a man who immediately puts Teddy on edge.

But it seems there are a lot of things troubling Teddy. He knows things are badly amiss on the island, but he, like the audience, can't seem to get a good grasp upon what that is. Making things much worse for Teddy is that he is still haunted by bad memories. He was a soldier in WWII who witnessed the atrocities of the Nazis first hand when his company liberated a death camp (which adds to his distrust of Dr. Naehring, who is German). He is also haunted by the re-occurring image of his wife, who was killed a few years ago in an apartment fire set by a deranged arsonist. Scorsese puts in several dream sequences where he talks to Delores, and those scenes are as creepy as those Stanley Kubrick placed throughout "The Shining".

To make matters worse, a hurricane blows in on the first night the Marshalls arrive, cutting them off from the rest of civilization, along with providing numerous occasions for Scorsese to add "jump-scare" scenes due to crashing lightning, falling trees, and power outages at the wrong moment.

And that is about as far as I feel I can go regarding the plot. It has been a long time since I have watched a good psychological mystery, and the last thing I'd want to do would be to give away any of its darker secrets. Suffice to say that there are twists and turns throughout the film, and it is the type of movie that will leave you racking your mind when it is over, thinking back to see if there were clues you missed, as well as looking back to see if there were any manipulative cheats. There were not, at least as far as I can tell. This is one of those films I'll have to watch again as soon as it comes out on DVD to see if it still rings true when I know the ending.

That is because the script itself, from Laeta Kalogridis's adaptation of the popular Dennis Lahane novel, isn't one of the best adaptations I've ever seen. I have not read the book, but I do understand from those that have that it is an intense page turner. I don't think it translates as well to the screen as some mysteries, at least based upon some pretty slow moving scenes in the middle of the film that threaten to drag the entire film down with it. In any case, I must give credit to the entire production crew as I now wish to actually read the book to see how it compares, something I don't often do.

As expected, this movie is as good as it is due to the genius filmmaking of Martin Scorsese and the remarkable performance from his favorite (current) actor, Leonardo DiCaprio. There are very few other actors I could see making this role jump off the screen in same manner accomplished by Leo. He plumbs the depths of a very flawed and dedicated man, creating a fully three dimensional character who we care about greatly, while still unsympathetically witnessing his many flaws. He dominates the screen, so much so that he completely overshadows Mark Ruffalo, who regrettably comes across as the prototypical boring, slower witted partner.

Ben Kingsley, on the other hand, takes a back seat to no one in the acting department. His Dr. Cawley is a totally fascinating character. The man seems to care deeply for his patients, but does he really? It is obvious that he is up to something, but Kingsley never gives anything away, and his toe-to-toe scenes with DiCaprio crackle with tension and intensity.

Several smaller roles with smart performances aid the film. Michelle Williams as Teddy's wife, Emily Mortimer and Patricia Clarkson as patients with stories of their own, Ted Levine as the domineering Chief Warden, and Jackie Earle Haley in one memorable scene as a patient locked up in the mysterious Ward C.

But it is Scorsese's presence that can be felt throughout the entire film, even if it is in a format that you haven't seen him use before. He has always been the kind of director who could set the mood like no other, and does he ever use that talent this time to mess with your head for two hours and twenty minutes. It's not the best movie he's done, and it's certainly not a "classic" in the lines of "Goodfellas", "Raging Bull", "Casino", or "The Departed", but it is great entertainment; something that will make you think, make you jump, and make you appreciate this type of mind bender in light of all of the mindless drivel usually seen at the theater.

My Rating: Brian Sipe (3 ½ footballs).