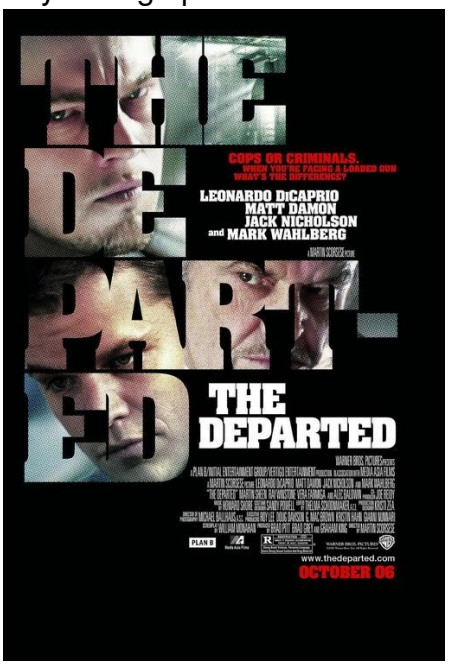
Mitch finishes up his look at the five contenders for Best Picture of 2006 with his review of "The Departed", a film I had the pleasure of seeing last weekend. What a flick!! Nicholson, Damon, DiCaprio, Wahlberg, Baldwin, and Sheen. Directed by Scorcese, and centered around the Irish mob in Boston. Slightly up my alley to say the least. Mitch has a pretty strong opinion on this film as well. Find out his thoughts in his review of "The Departed".



There is simply no other director who can make a film about organized crime like Martin Scorsese. “Mean Streets”, “Goodfellas”, “Casino”, and “Gangs of New York” have all featured men battling each other and their own personal demons as they strive for money and power. To that impressive resume we now add one more, “The Departed”, a masterpiece of violence, ambition, internal conflict, and loyalty beyond reason featuring some of the best acting and directing of the year.

Family is at the center of any Scorsese mob film, and it is no different here. Billy Costigan (Leonardo DiCarprio) and Colin Sullivan (Matt Damon) are two young men with little family remaining except for the father figure who serves as the center of each of their worlds; Frank Costello (Jack Nicholson), the head of the Irish Mafia in Boston. But they have gotten to their mutual destination via different routes. Colin was orphaned and living with his grandparents when Costello took the young man under his wings. Morally ambiguous, but with a lust for power of his own, Colin graduates with honors from the Massachusetts State Police Academy, and is soon a detective in the Special Investigations Unit, a perfect place for him to tip off his benefactor Costello on all police activity.

Costigan is a doppelganger to Sullivan. Throughout his poverty laced upbringing in South

Boston, he idolized his parents, and followed his father's example of hard, honest work rather than fall in with the rest of his family who were intertwined with Costello's criminal empire. A near genius, Billy wants to be a Trooper for a short time mostly as a burr in the side of his remaining crime tainted family before moving on to something else. But where Colin is smooth and political, Billy is impulsive, rash, and violent. He is to be drummed out of the academy for striking an instructor with a chair, but instead is recruited by the undercover unit, headed by paternal Captain Queenan (Martin Sheen) and the fiery, crass Sgt. Dignam (Mark Wahlberg) to work for them in an attempt to get Costello.

Billy is sent to prison for three months for assault to establish his credentials, then sets up operations back in South Boston, soon attracting the attention of Costello via his main henchman, the sadistic Mr. French (Ray Winstone). Having no sons of his own, Costello seems to always be on the lookout for another protégé, and after an extremely violent confrontation with Billy to ensure his motives; he befriends the young man, and puts him to work for his crew.

The cat and mouse game is therefore set, with Queenan's informer having infiltrated the Mob, and Costello's mole at the highest level of law enforcement. While Billy ingratiates himself further into the inner workings of Costello's gang, Colin continues to use his charm and intelligence to rise to a leadership position in the SIU. The contrast between the two is striking. Billy lives in his dead mother's dilapidated house in one of the poorest areas of the city while Colin gets an expensive apartment financed by Costello with a clear view of the Capitol Building (where his ambitious goals hope to lead him someday). He also charms his way into the life of a social psychiatrist (Vera Farmiga) who, in a stretch of credibility, also counsels Billy as part of his cover.

Eventually, both sides become aware of a mole in their midst, and the race is on to see who will be first to eliminate their problem. Betrayals and other twists further complicate issues until the inevitable series of final gut-wrenching, ultra-violent confrontations take this movie to an even higher level.

But unlike a good caper film, the soul of the movie is not in the events themselves, but in the reactions of the characters to them. In this case, Scorsese gets Oscar worthy performances from all five of his lead actors. In smaller roles, Sheen and Wahlberg are a terrific tandem as the only men who know of Billy's identity. Sheen is much different from his elitist Jed Bartlett

character on “The West Wing”; paternal and kind with a strong lower middle-class work ethic and understated resolve. Wahlberg is his emotional polar opposite; a firebrand who takes no prisoners in dealing with anyone else and is wound so tightly that he might explode at any minute.

Jack Nicholson is certain to obtain his thirteenth Oscar nomination for his portrayal of the ruthless Mob Chieftain. Scorsese wisely does not have Jack run away from his age, as at one point Billy asks him why he still holds on to power despite being almost 70…a question one might ask Nicholson himself. I’m not sure if he answered as Costello or as Jack when he stated that he didn’t “need” to do any of it…but he still does anyway, with the unsaid obvious answer being that he does it because he likes it. And despite the character being so charismatic that it would be easy for an actor such as Nicholson to go over the top, for the most part Jack pulls it back in when appropriate, letting you see the boiling rage in his eyes behind the soothing, calm voice. I was expecting more of a Pacino-level fit of bombastic scenery chewing, but instead saw a performance that I might have expected had Robert DiNiro played the role. However, Nicholson still showed that the maniacal animal in Costello could appear at any minute, making his performance so much more riveting and shocking with his flashes of vicious rage.

Although Nicholson is the most prominent star, the movie is carried by virtuoso performances from Damon and DiCaprio. Damon has leveraged his charms, good looks, and boy-next-door appeal into a very nice career as a leading man and Action Hero. So it takes an actor with a great deal of confidence in himself and his director to skewer those traits into a character that is not at all sympathetic. He has done it before with his performance in “Syriana”, but he takes it to a much higher level here. You do not ever really feel for Colin, and you want him to get caught. But at the same time, he is not a typical two-dimensional villain, and Damon does a fantastic job showing you the insides of a man who has lost his moral compass, but is still conflicted about his dual identities nonetheless, and is uncomfortable with that conflict. He is a compulsive, natural liar, but is genuinely hurt when his lies cause emotional pain to his girlfriend.

Leonardo DiCaprio, like Damon, is evolving into one of the best young actors on screen today. Reviled by many for his boyish appearance and his turn in “Titanic”, Leo’s recent path has become the complete opposite of Ben Affleck’s career over the last several years. While Affleck parlayed his good looks into weak “star vehicle” bombs like “Paycheck”, “Daredevil”, and “Gigli”, DiCaprio has sought out complex, untraditional roles not normally associated with “pretty boys”. Perhaps his biggest stroke of luck was in landing the lead role in Scorsese’s “Gangs of New York”, as his performance in that underrated film impressed Scorsese so much that he has cast

him in the lead for “The Aviator” and “The Departed”.

In this case, DiCaprio far exceeds the impressive performance he gave as the reclusive billionaire Howard Hughes, and creates a character that will be remembered for generations, much like Ray Liotta’s Henry Hill in “Goodfellas”. He is simply gripping as Billy Costigan, and any time he is on screen, you are concerned for his well being, and empathetic towards the mental and physical price Billy is paying for his duplicity. Billy has two disadvantages in his charade when compared to Colin. The first being that the danger he faces is far greater as the people he is spying on are much more ruthless than the police. The other is that Billy truly does have a conscience, in contrast to the ethically challenged Colin, and the guilt and stress are slowly tearing him apart, a fact that is evident in every frame featuring DiCaprio.

Much has been made of Martin Scorsese’s long voyage as a bridesmaid when it comes to the Best Director Oscar. This may just be the year he finally wins it. Clint Eastwood may be his only competition in the more upbeat, patriotic “Flags of Our Fathers”, but if all things are equal between them, look for Scorsese to finally be standing on the podium with his statue come next spring. He will certainly deserve it.

My Rating: Bernie Kosar (4 footballs). In my mind, two of the five nominations for Best Picture are now set with this one and “World Trade Center”.