

## Hit the Road, Jack: “The Departed” and “The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning”

Written by Mike Schulz

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### ***THE DEPARTED***

Because Martin Scorsese's internal-affairs thriller *The Departed* is so colossally entertaining, so brimming with performance and filmmaking craft, I may as well get its major failing out of the way right off the bat: What the hell is Jack Nicholson *doing* here?

I'm not referring to his *presence* in the film. As eccentric Boston mob boss Frank Costello, Nicholson would seem ideally cast in Scorsese's remake of 2002's highly regarded Chinese gangland saga, *Infernal Affairs*; the larger-than-life role calls for an equally larger-than-life actor, one who can play terrifying, smart, and decadently funny in equal measure. And there are random moments in *The Departed* when Nicholson is superb, especially when he drops his insinuating voice to little more than a whisper - Costello has been in power for so long that Nicholson doesn't have to do much at all to suggest a lifetime of fearless menace.

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Why, then, does he insist on doing so much *more*? Sporting the usual bag of tricks - his comically arched eyebrows, his wicked cackle, his willingness to trash a scene's rhythm for the sake of an easy laugh - Nicholson never tries to convince us that we're watching a character here; we're watching *Jack*, love him or leave him. (Nicholson's Costello can't reference the rats in his organization without launching into a full-scale, nose-twitching, cheese-sniffing rat *impersonation* .)

Personally, I'd leave him. Nicholson's antics do make a segment of the audience chortle, and he's certainly never dull. Yet actors from Edward G. Robinson to James Gandolfini have been able to make monstrous criminals amusing *without* engaging in this kind of pandering sitcom shtick, and when a movie is as precise and thrillingly constructed as *The Departed* is, the laziness of Nicholson's caricature becomes all the more egregious. You feel that Scorsese was just so delighted that Lord Jack deigned to appear in his film that he didn't bother giving him direction (or perhaps, considering the tightness of the rest of the film's ensemble, he *did* , and the legendary star simply refused to hear it). Thankfully, Nicholson is the lone element of *The Departed* that *doesn't* work, and the rest of the movie is so magnificently enjoyable that even his unremitting scenery-gobbling can't ruin it.

Leonardo DiCaprio plays Billy Costigan, a fledgling police officer recruited to infiltrate Costello's gang and bring the hood to justice. Matt Damon plays Colin Sullivan, recruited by *Costello* to infiltrate the Boston P.D. and serve as his inside man. Costigan suspects that a crooked cop is working for Costello; Sullivan suspects that Costello has employed a snitch. And working from William Monahan's sensationally intuitive screenplay, director Scorsese has fashioned a tense and endlessly inventive cat-and-mouse game between the two *doppelgängers* : Who will uncover whose true identity first, and how can one man expose the other without revealing his own deception in the process?

With its bursts of unexpected, legitimately shocking violence, rude humor, and a rock soundtrack peppered with perfect choices for the material, this is the sort of thing that no American director does better than Scorsese. Yet it's been so long since the helmer has assayed material of this sort that the greatness of *The Departed* isn't merely a thrill; it's

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something of a surprise. After the give-me-an-Oscar-or-give-me-death grandiloquence of *Gangs of New York*

and

*The Aviator*

, the fact that Scorsese can still create a zippy, exhilaratingly nasty entertainment such as *The Departed*

is cause for celebration.

The film, though, is even better than that description suggests, as it isn't just excitement in a void - the spectacular timing of the thrills keeps your senses alert, but Scorsese keeps your mind alert, too. There may be no more exquisitely taut sequence in 2006 movies than the scene in which Costigan and Sullivan find themselves on opposite ends of the phone, each waiting for the other to speak. We understand the characters' hesitancy - whoever opens his mouth first blows his cover - and Scorsese lets the moment hang in the air for an aching long time; by considering the ramifications of the characters' next moves, the director is letting the *audience* build the suspense. Several scenes here are nearly as fine - including a marvelous one in which Sullivan has to tip off Costello to a potential bust while surrounded by the cops

*attempting*

the bust - and in each of them Scorsese displays the subtle mastery that has made him deservedly legendary; I've written this at least twice before in the last decade but mean it every time: This is Scorsese's best work since

*GoodFellas*

.

DiCaprio, with his unwavering intensity and commitment, and Damon, his mind racing behind an ever-genial façade, are even better than you may have hoped, and the supporting cast is marvelously convincing: Mark Wahlberg and Alec Baldwin are both powerfully emotive and hysterically funny as the cops' superiors; Martin Sheen turns in a wise, detailed turn as Costigan's captain; Vera Farmiga, despite a role that falls too easily into contrivance - she's Sullivan's girlfriend *and* Costigan's shrink - lends some understated poignancy; and the film's roster of peripheral figures, played by such talents as Ray Winstone and Anthony Anderson, is effortlessly believable. (

*The Departed* is a great argument for an Academy Award for Best Casting.) Devoid of a single lethargic scene in nearly two-and-a-half hours, it would be hard to fathom how

*The Departed*

could be more gripping.

Well, I guess there's *one* way, but that would mean getting rid of the element that may be luring a crowd otherwise disinclined to attend

*The Departed*. And considering that he's kind of fun to watch even at his worst, if your only complaint about a film is

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Jack Nicholson's performance

*in*

it, that barely qualifies as a complaint at all.



### ***THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE: THE BEGINNING***

About a dozen moments in *The Departed* made me jump out of fear and surprise, which is about a dozen more than I got from *The Texas*

*Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning*

. We all know that after the release of a hugely successful scare flick, the next few years will be filled with variants of that hit - after

*Scream*

, we were swamped with self-referential, "ironic" horror films; after

*The Sixth Sense*

, it was all about dread and solemnity; after

*The Ring*

, jolts came by raiding the Asian catalogue and enough water imagery to make Chaucer weep with envy. So when will we stop being inundated with the bastard children of

*Saw*

? (When they stop making money, I guess.) If you want relentless gore - and enough paying customers apparently do - this prequel will certainly suffice; it's just 90 minutes of solid torture, like

*The Passion of the Christ*

with no higher purpose whatsoever. But Jonathan Liebesman's movie is beyond boring - as the film's hateful hayseeds all appear in 2003's

*Massacre*

remake, it's not like there's any suspense about Leatherface and his clan receiving their comeuppance - and the grisly effects are repeated (literally)

*ad nauseam*

; watching the movie is indistinguishable from spending the day in an abattoir, except that -

unlike the generic youths here - you actually feel

something when the

*animals*

get slaughtered.