



PUBLIC ENEMIES

With a low-key yet intensely charismatic Johnny Depp as its lead, you could describe Michael Mann's *Public Enemies* as the story behind the criminal activity of the infamous, Depression-era bank robber John Dillinger. But that's not entirely accurate. The film is also about the nascent, frequently misguided authority of the FBI, personified here by a stalwart agent (a somber, less-throaty-than-usual Christian Bale) and showboating chief J. Edgar Hoover (a spectacular Billy Crudup). It's also about early media saturation in our country, and the public's complicity in turning villains into heroes, and the labyrinthine hierarchies among American gangsters, and - as embodied by a dazzlingly desirable and powerful Marion Cotillard - the ever-unpredictable nature of love. And, more than anything, it's about the exquisite craftsmanship of Michael Mann, whose *Public Enemies* doesn't look or sound quite like any other crime movie you've seen, and whose technical virtuosity might make *Public Enemies* impossible to forget.

Working alongside the wizardly cinematographer Dante Spinotti, who shot the film in high-definition digital, the director lends nearly every frame a gloriously lived-in realness; aided by the stunning period design, there's absolutely nothing artificial about either the compositions or the '30s-era *mise en scène*. And while Mann is building the narrative urgency and exploring character with accumulating force and complexity, he's also staging the sorts of hypnotic, almost unbearably thrilling sequences that make you want to applaud their climaxes: Dillinger, following a jailbreak, sitting at an intersection's eternal red light; the ultra-violent shoot-out at a remote inn in the woods; our anti-hero watching a newsreel in which an on-screen Hoover tells the audience that Dillinger might be (and, it turns out, *is*) sitting among them. Given the determined seriousness and deliberate pacing of his works, it usually takes me a few repeat viewings to fully appreciate and enjoy a Mann movie. After one viewing here, I can hardly *wait* to see how much I grow to love *Public Enemies*.

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Written by Mike Schulz
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AWAY WE GO

If you considered catching Sam Mendes' *Away We Go* but held off because of its indie-cutesy, *Juno*

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advertising campaign, rest assured: This amiable, frequently hilarious road comedy is nowhere near as precious as its poster indicates. Which doesn't necessarily mean you'll believe a word of it. In the film, thirtysomething lovers Burt (John Krasinski) and Verona (Maya Rudolph) travel the country - with a Canadian pit stop - in search of a permanent home for themselves and their unborn daughter, and the friends and family members they visit compose a veritable Noah's Ark of eccentrics: Burt's wannabe-bohemian parents (Catherine O'Hara and Jeff Daniels); a monstrously inappropriate mom (Allison Janney) and her milquetoast husband (Jim Gaffigan); a pair of flaky New Age hipsters (Maggie Gyllenhaal and Josh Hamilton); and so on. Everyone, even the nominally "normal" characters, is a stereotype, and the film's premise is too convenient and adorable by half. But if you accept it as just a funny, funky adventure and don't search for deeper meaning (because there really

isn't

any), Mendes' episodic pastiche proves to be enormously entertaining. While the supporting figures are one-note, those notes are played with superb comic skill, and Dave Eggers' and Vendela Vida's oftentimes hysterical script boasts enormous charm. Krasinski and Rudolph, meanwhile, form an endearingly sardonic, sweetly romantic partnership;

Away We Go

may be a fairy tale, but these two, happily, are completely deserving of their Happily Ever After.



MY SISTER'S KEEPER

Charmed and Dangerous: "Public Enemies," "Away We Go," and "My Sister's Keeper"

Written by Mike Schulz
Friday, 03 July 2009 06:00

My Sister's Keeper, which concerns a teenage girl's battle against leukemia and her family's struggle to cope with her illness, is an effective tearjerker, and despite the subject matter, audiences can have a fun time comparing notes on which moment made them absolutely Lose It. (For my money, it was the scene in which the girl donned a brand-new dress and wig for her first date, and asked her dad if she looked pretty. Great - I'm welling up *again* .)

Personally, though, I would've had a better time if director Nick Cassavetes had resisted his natural urge - also apparent in

John Q.

and

The Notebook

- to push the movie's pathos past its breaking point. Based on Jodi Picoult's novel, the material is already harrowing and heartbreaking enough without an excess of slow-motion iconography, sentimental montages, lugubrious music selections, and the requisite paging-through-the-scrapbook gut-wrencher included to sweeten the deal.

The film tries way too hard to elicit responses that likely would've come just as easily - and certainly more *honestly* - without Cassavetes' prodding, but *My Sister's Keeper* is still touching and surprisingly tough-minded, and it's exceptionally well-acted. Sofia Vassilieva, as the cancer-stricken teen, refuses to play martyr and offers a beautifully honest portrayal; Cameron Diaz, Abigail Breslin, Jason Patric, and Evan Ellingson are wholly believable as the girl's troubled clan; Joan Cusack delivers a brief, emotionally acute turn as a grieving judge; and Alec Baldwin routinely shows up as a cagey lawyer, drops the film in his briefcase, and strolls off with it. He even scores a big laugh with an iron-lung joke - in a movie about

cancer

, for heaven's sake. We've had the evidence for years, and now it's official: Baldwin

can

do anything.