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THE ROAD TO PERDITION

Viewing *The Road to Perdition*, I didn't much care how the plot worked itself out or how the characters interacted; I just wanted to watch the rain land on Tom Hanks' and Paul Newman's fedoras.

Director Sam Mendes's gangster saga, the first film he's directed since his *American Beauty* debut in 1999, is one of the most aesthetically beautiful movies I've seen in many a moon; the production and costume design for this '30s-era tale is beyond reproach, and Conrad L. Hall's cinematography is marvelously expressive. That is, it would be if there was something in it to actually *express*. For *The Road to Perdition*, visually astonishing as most of it is, proves to be mostly lifeless, an experiment in florid stylization that gives its characters no room to breathe. Mendes and company apparently worked so hard at creating Art that they neglected to make the film emotionally engaging.

After a lethargic opening that establishes the film's Illinois-based, Irish-American milieu, *Perdition* is set up as a coming-of-age fable, in which young Michael Sullivan Jr. (Tyler Hoechlin) learns that his

emotionally distant father (Hanks) is a contract killer under the control of a seemingly benevolent boss, John Rooney (Newman), who treats Michael Sr. like a son. Witnessing his father participate in a gangland shooting, Michael Jr. inadvertently puts his family's lives in jeopardy, and soon he and his father are on the run, trying to escape the wrath of Rooney's son, Connor (Daniel Craig), who hates Michael Sr. for being his father's favorite, and a creepy tabloid-photographer-cum-assassin named Maguire (Jude Law), who's just plain nuts.

On the surface, *Perdition* hits on some extraordinary themes involving father-son relationships: the fear of not being loved, of being unable to express affection, of being a disappointment and an embarrassment, of having your status as "favorite son" usurped by an outsider. And it might be these themes themselves that are leading some critics and audience members to champion *The Road to Perdition* as a gangster masterpiece à la *The Godfather*. But the film's excessive stylization negates its humanity. You never for a moment believe you're in any kind of "real world" – the rain falls in Noah's Ark-like increments, Michael Jr. works out his grief in record time, and with the film's numerous public shootings, there's exactly one police officer onscreen who reacts to any of them – and so the events in the film feel weightless and their outcomes preordained; this isn't a problem in classic *noir*, where you're not meant to feel anything but detached fascination, but it's crippling to a movie in which the bonds between fathers and sons are its central theme. Hanks, Newman, and young Hoechlin do their damnedest to suggest inner turmoil (the dull Daniel Craig, though, is tragically miscast) but don't have a lot to work with; while David Self's screenplay is often terse and direct, he has written archetypes, not characters, and a hollowness lingers over the actors' performances.

Jude Law, however, isn't saddled with any pretense of humanity, and comes through with a crackling, frighteningly enjoyable portrayal; *Perdition*'s visuals aside, he's the best thing in the movie. Perhaps the most handsome actor in modern movies, Law seems to relish playing this petty scumbag with rotting teeth and no moral compass, and Mendes' finest scene is a simple one in which Law and Hanks size each other up in a roadside diner, each waiting for the other to strike first. Mendes pulls off several moments that are minor classics – Hanks' confrontation with a trembling speakeasy owner, Newman's slow recognition of the depth of Hanks' anger – but despite the brilliance of much of his staging, you're constantly aware of its self-consciousness, even in scenes that *aren't* steeped in guns, rain, and darkness. A sequence of Michael Jr. fouling up his role as getaway-car driver feels like a sop to the laugh-deprived audience (who, pathetically grateful for this relief from *Perdition*'s dourness, roars with approval), and the Sullivans' safe house is such a beatific shoreline

paradise – with a Golden Retriever, no less! – that when violence finally erupts it feels inevitable, and obvious. It's nearly impossible to connect with Mendes' film as anything other than an exercise in style, and for many, that'll be just fine, but it's hard to shake the feeling, when you leave the theatre, that there's a lot less to
The Road to Perdition
than meets the eye.

HALLOWEEN: RESURRECTION

With the benefit of hindsight, 1998's *Halloween: H20*, the seventh in the Michael Myers series, seems positively audacious. Most of it was crap, of course, but by insisting that
Halloween
episodes three through six simply never existed, much the way this summer's
The Sum of All Fears
recast Jack Ryan as an unmarried, fatherless upstart, the filmmakers stumbled upon an intriguing concept that gave
H20
some structure (Michael continues his killing spree 20 years after the original
Halloween
murders) and, aided in no small part by star Jamie Lee Curtis, some emotional heft. (Curtis's Laurie Strode character, who is Michael's sister, must overcome her psychoses and stop the carnage.)
H20
's last 20 minutes played out like
High Noon
for the slasher-flick audience, and it was trashily, giddily entertaining, particularly in Laurie's final dispatching of her nemesis;
H20
's last reel provided an incredibly satisfying finale to a generally unsatisfying movie. So it was with mixed emotions that I went to see
Halloween: Resurrection
, the latest in the horror series that, like its leading bogeyman, just won't die. Jamie Lee Curtis was returning, which was good; so was Michael, which, considering that his head got lopped off at the close of
H20

, wasn't. Just how were the filmmakers going to revive this concept?

Ineptly, it turns out, but not wholly unimaginatively. Michael's "resurrection" is explained in the film's first 15 minutes – its logic *sort of* works based on my four-year-old memories of *Hallowee n* 's last installment – and then we're thrust into the new plot, in which your standard group of horny teens is trapped, *Big Brother* style, in Michael's decaying suburban home as part of a live Internet webcast. They're put there to uncover the secrets behind Michael's murderous past, unaware that Michael is also in the house, and ready to show the youths how little tolerance he has for trespassers. This premise features a modicum of cleverness, but its presentation is awful in all the expected ways. *Resurrection* is full of terrible acting (lead Busta Rhymes being the most egregious offender), witless characters, groan-inducing dialogue, and obvious staging by director Rick Rosenthal, and it doesn't provide even one good scare – is any of this a surprise? The only shock in the film might be in how early, and thoughtlessly, the filmmakers dispose of Jamie Lee Curtis; to paraphrase a wittier mind than mine, making a *Halloween* film without Curtis is like doing *Hamlet* without Hamlet.