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# LFF 2019 Review: The Irishman

Online Screen Editor Jacob Heayes has nothing but praise for Martin Scorsese's latest crime epic.

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Written by [Jacob Heayes](#) | Oct 17, 2019



**I**t's been a long time since Martin Scorsese released his seminal mob classic *GoodFellas*. Almost thirty years in fact. When it was announced that Scorsese would be making his return to the mobster world (complete with the holy trifecta of Robert de Niro, Al Pacino and Joe Pesci), expectations were suitably soaring. What could he possibly add and achieve after all this time? *The Irishman* is the answer, a film that fittingly has the burden of time running in both its form and storytelling. Adopting

revolutionary digital deaging technology, *The Irishman* tells a decade-spanning saga that feels equally like a send-off for its on-screen stars as it does a new chapter in their careers.

Let's address that elephant in the room first. Rather than swapping out new actors (which is only sparingly used in this case) or applying latex makeup, the digital effects are instead surprisingly convincing after an initial period of adjustment. There's always something a little ethereal about de Niro's lighter, wrinkle-free face yet once immersed, it never felt uncanny or distracting to an extent that removed me from the experience. Instead, it stops acting as gimmick and becomes subtext for a story that is inherently bound up with the inexorable passage of time, acted out by remnants of the cast's former selves. Flash-forwards have unprecedented potency as the trio effectively reminisce on their own eras gone-by, expressed both with written and visual heft.

Behind the nostalgia and the digital trickery, however, is a crime epic as complex and compelling as its most highly respected peers. Taking place over the course of much of the 20th century, Frank Sheeran finds himself entangled in relationships with notorious union leader Jimmy Hoffa (a fantastic Al Pacino) and mob boss Russell Bufalino (an equally sensational Joe Pesci). Both figures wish to impose their influence onto Sheeran as he becomes entrenched in Hoffa's life, yet quickly the pair begin to clash and Sheeran is ultimately faced with a history-changing decision.

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Much of *The Irishman* rests in the charisma of its cast. All three leads are brilliant: de Niro is the perfect audience vessel and brings unexpected poignancy to the role whereas Pacino and Pesci each bring a uniquely authoritative, incredibly watchable energy to their roles. They're surrounded by an equally impressive supporting cast of Harvey Keitel, Ray Romano, Jesse Plemons, Anna Paquin and others who all serve to add richness to this historical rendition of a violent, gang-ridden America.

As expected too, Scorsese brings his traditional grit in superbly choreographed scenes of action and tension in equal measure. Firearms go off in alarming, quick blasts spilling (or rather 'painting') their surroundings red in gory collateral. There's much of *The Irishman* however

that is remarkably restrained with a focus on the gut-churning build, instead of the release the audience and characters crave. Exquisitely layered conversations and meticulous production design are just two of the reasons why it's so effortless to become absorbed in Scorsese's world, and why it's such an investing experience.

The *other* elephant in the room is obviously its flashy runtime of 209 minutes (that's just under 3.5 hours), yet this is a thought that quickly vanishes from the opening dolly shot. Like losing yourself in an excellent novel, *The Irishman* adopts many of the same textual principles that make it feel vast in scope, yet intimate in character. Characters change, age and die over the course of hours, historical events flash by in minutes. It's been a long time since Scorsese last made a film of this kind, but for *The Irishman*, time is a precious commodity that expires all too quickly.

## We give it

4.5



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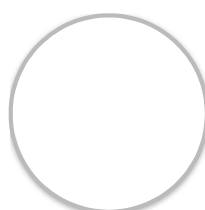
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