

# ENTERTAINMENT

## Movie Review

# 'Road to Perdition' Intelligent, Heartfelt Entertainment

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The new Tom Hanks flick, "Road to Perdition," is a summer movie oddity: an R-rated, grown-up "event" movie with something actually on its mind.

The next film from "American Beauty" director Sam Mendes, "Road to Perdition" does seem a bit weighed down by Oscar aspirations, but I like the fact that it was released in the summer, typically a dumping ground for unchallenging fare.

It's a gutsy move for a gutsy movie.

"Road..." has a dramatic structure similar to Roberto Benigni's "Life is Beautiful," and I forgive this film's excesses for the same reason I forgave that film its: It is told as the recollection of a young boy.

Of course it's going to be a bit mannered. The things we see as children always looks different when viewed back through the eyes of age.

The film takes place over six weeks in the winter of 1931, and it captures the period succinctly, without being showy about it.

As a matter of fact, nothing about the execution of this film is showy. I would describe it more as confident, evocative and even subtle.

Working with much of the same behind-the-cameras crew as he did on

"...Beauty," director Mendes has crafted another contemplative meditation that also succeeds as slick entertainment.

Hanks plays a mob enforcer/hitman whose young son one day witnesses his dad plying his gruesome trade. Although Hanks' boss is inclined to let the boy slide, the boss' son isn't having any of it and orders the family hit anyhow.

This results in Hanks and his family having to take it on the lam, while being pursued by various ne'er-do-wells over the course of the rest of the film.

It's good to see Paul Newman working again, and he turns in a strong performance as Hanks' mob boss, but this is Tom Hanks' film, all the way.

Mendes has coaxed a deeply nuanced performance out of his star, Hanks' finest since "Philadelphia." It's a performance of quiet moments and small gestures that never seems underplayed, or overthought.

Hanks usually relies more on his charming personality than his skills as an actor ("Cast Away" comes immediately to mind, as do most of his romantic comedies). In this role, though, he shows how much he's grown as an artist, on his way to becoming the most popular actor in movies today.

Gosh, isn't it swell when good things happen to nice guys?

The rest of the movie rises to Hanks' performance level as well.

Mendes makes great use of indigenous music to enhance scenes, and underscore (no pun intended) dramatic moments. The soundtrack is never intrusive, and frequently nothing more than a clever application of the sounds already to be found in the scene.

Supporting performances are solid all around, from Stanley Tucci as Chicago mob underboss Frank Nitti, to an underused Jennifer Jason Leigh as the wife of Hanks' gentleman wiseguy.

Making a really strong impression as a hit man on Hanks' trail, Jude Law — he was one of the best things in the weird Spielberg/Kubrick hybrid "A.I." a couple years back — adds another richly-observed, offbeat character to his resume.

In the end, though, this is a movie held together by its belief in its own dignity. Nothing feels false or forced, and it raises more questions about fathers and sons, and the ties that bind, than it tries to answer.

The fact that the movie is so plot-rich betrays its humble origins as a graphic novel, that red-headed stepchild of the legitimate publishing family. That the story has remained so faithful to its own idiosyncrasies on its inevitably long journey to the silver screen is surely a testament to Mendes' Oscar-generated clout in Hollywood.

As I was marveling at the film's uniquely uncompromised dramatic integrity, it occurred to me how awful this material could have been in the hands of a less gifted mainstream director, say, Joel Schumacher, for instance. Or Ron Howard.

You know the kind of feel-good fakery these fellows crank out; like the scene in "Apollo 13" where, even though Tom Hanks' character doesn't actually make it to the moon, he does anyhow — in a dream!

Yay! This warm and fuzzy moment brought to you by the redoubtable Ronnie Howard, new lemon-scented Tide, and Altoids, the curiously strong breath mint!

Give me a break.

"Road to Perdition" is movie-making with a conscience, not movie-making by committee. It's deeply thought-out, and although very violent in brief spurts, consistently respectful of its audience's intelligence.

This reviewer can't encourage you strongly enough to hit the "Road..." Jack.

Addendum: If you're looking for a Tom Hanks video rental tip, you could do worse than checking out 1990's "Joe vs. the Volcano." Hanks' first flick with Meg Ryan is an easygoing romance/fantasy with a handful of absolutely brilliant, delightful scenes. Vastly underrated.