

# Exclusive: Scorsese's 'Departed' Rocks

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**FOX NEWS**

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**Jack Nicholson** in a **Martin Scorsese** film? With **Matt Damon**, **Leonardo DiCaprio**, **Alec Baldwin** and **Mark Wahlberg** in the cast as well? Are you kidding?

No, I am not.

"The Departed," which I saw on Friday night, is a rocking comedy-of-a-gangster-shoot-out stuffed with great performances both big and small by all these guys, and Scorsese — who returns to his favorite genre — is the puppeteer pulling the strings.

Actually, he's not pulling all the strings. Nicholson is completely "out there" and over the edge in a performance that will either win him kudos or tomatoes (I vote for the former) as a psychopathic killer who has no personal boundaries and works, shall we say, outside the margins of even recognized behavior for organized crime.

In one scene, Nicholson pulls out a sex toy and surprises Damon in a movie theater. In another, he wears sunglasses all the way through despite, I'm told, Scorsese's wishes that he didn't.

But you can see that Nicholson took to his work with relish, and — as he did with *The Joker* in "Batman" — he makes sure no one forgets him.

Still, "The Departed" is Scorsese's film. From the first strains of **The Rolling Stones'** "Gimme Shelter," he's telling us we are back in the land of "Goodfellas" after his last two films, best picture nominees "Gangs of New York" and "The Aviator."

And while "Gangs" had its share of crazy, unpredictable, graphic violence, really nothing prepares you for the bloodletting in "The Departed." It's at once maniacal and casual, and would make Tony Soprano and his gang run for the hills.

"The Departed" constitutes a couple of ideas mashed together. It's partly an American remake of the Hong Kong classic "Infernal Affairs." Then again, the story has been moved to Boston and turned into the saga of Whitey Bulger, an FBI informant whose gang runs wild while the feds clean up the mafia.

Nicholson is the Bulger character (he's named here for New York mobster **Frank Costello**). Damon is the bad cop who's in Costello's pocket; DiCaprio is the police mole in Costello's gang, sent in by **Martin Sheen** and an unusually good Wahlberg.

In many ways, the story set up in "The Departed" is reminiscent of **Michael Mann's** "Heat" as DiCaprio and Damon spend most of the movie as each other's doppelgangers. Their paths only meet toward the end, when the plot is clearly laid out and resolution for every one of these corrupted characters is close at hand.

There are some good little performances, too, from Alec Baldwin (in an especially funny improvised scene), **Anthony Anderson** and newcomer (after a decade of work) **Vera Farmiga** as the girl caught between Damon and DiCaprio.

There are a lot of great things about "The Departed," but I would say the greatest might be **Thelma Schoonmaker's** effortless editing. She finally won an Oscar last year for "The Aviator," but I think what she has done here, especially in the first act, is amazing.

She and Scorsese really are a team. Scorsese and cinematographer **Michael Ballhaus** get the performances and the spectacular shots. Then Schoonmaker adds the timing and pace. In "The Departed," she's got scenes within scenes, and the action moving back and forth almost at the same time, and it all works. You might even call this film "The Deceptive" because the work is so good.

Scorsese remains our greatest director, surpassed by no one. He is also part of a dying breed of grand auteurs that includes **Robert Altman, Woody Allen, Clint Eastwood, Sidney Lumet, Steven Spielberg** and **Francis Ford Coppola**. The rest of them now have one thing Scorsese doesn't: an Oscar.

This is a sore point for the Academy. If Scorsese isn't nominated for one this year, I think it's time he got a Lifetime Achievement Award. "The Departed" is so far above what we see in theaters these days. But standards are so low now, I'm just worried new audiences won't appreciate it.

### The New Whitney-Mariah-Celine Arrives

Readers of Billboard magazine may be a little startled today when they page through the reviews of new singles. There, boxed with a new **Christina Aguilera** track, is **Chuck Taylor's** review of "Cars" by **Naomi Striemer**.

"Remember the first time you heard **Whitney, Mariah** or **Celine** and recognized a star was born? Naomi Striemer will-must-propel beyond her foray at AC and become the commanding diva of the decade."

Taylor isn't kidding. He concludes: "The year's most promising melodic debut. A standing ovation of an endorsement."

But here's the punchline: Striemer's record isn't on a major label. It's on S Records, and the S stands for **Steven Nowack**, a Canadian entrepreneur who heard Striemer performing live last year in a Chapters bookstore up north. He was thunderstruck and immediately signed on. What followed was a production by **Narada Michael Walden**, the man who originally brought Whitney and Mariah to fame, and a guitar solo contribution by none other than **Carlos Santana**.

However: despite Naomi's youth, beauty and talent, no one wanted her. She'd already had a botched deal at Epic Records, but she was ultimately dropped. When I met her last week, she told me she went into a depression at that point and returned home to Canada convinced her career was over. At 21.

I met Nowack with Walden at **Clive Davis'** party this last February. The two of them told me this story, and Nowack said: "I'm going to start my own record company."

You know, considering how completely impenetrable the music industry is for people already in it, Nowack's proclamation seemed naïve at best and dangerous at worst. He spent the rest of this year crisscrossing the country, playing "Cars" for radio programmers and annoying the hell out of them, I'm sure.

But now the album is ready for launch on Oct. 6. The Billboard review of "Cars" is no joke. Striemer is the real thing, and "Cars" will not be a hit if radio programmers at places like Clear Channel don't get it: With this singer, they have a chance to create a superstar for a new generation. Stay tuned for more news about Naomi Striemer. And remember, you heard it here first.

Toronto Goes for 'Bella'

I am very pleased that the Toronto Film Festival chose "Bella" to win their top audience award over the weekend. I told you about this film last Monday. It's incredibly charming, with terrific performances by **Tammy Blanchard** and Mexican star **Eduardo Verástegui** and **Manny Perez**. It's directed by **Alejandro Gomez Monteverde**.

It's too easy to say this is the "My Big Fat Greek Wedding" of this season, because "Bella" is far more complex and sophisticated while losing none of the humor.

Whoever decides to release "Bella" will have a nice little hit on their hands. The freshness and lack of affectation in "Bella" must have appealed to audiences who had to endure a number of big-name films that seemed contrived, stale or calculated ...

At the same time, the international critics gave their award to "Death of a President." This may reflect certain feelings around the world about **George Bush**, but I'm sticking to my guns here. It's inappropriate to make a film about killing a sitting U.S. president, no matter what your politics. There's nothing smart or cool about that.

"Death of a President" may be a big hit overseas, but I doubt it. And its sale to Newmarket Films in the U.S. — the same company that released "The Passion of the Christ" — speaks volumes. Newmarket paid \$1 million for "DoaP," about a quarter of what it cost. In the U.S., though, I think it will be ignored not only for its tastelessness, but because it's a bad, boring film, a long, tedious "CSI" that goes nowhere to prove a stupid point ...

And out of Focus: the film company that couldn't get "Brokeback Mountain" an Oscar debuted one film at Toronto, but "Catch a Fire" didn't catch on. With only the mediocre "Hollywoodland" to fall back on, Focus won't have an Oscar film this year ...

Toronto is no Montreal, but it did have some attractions. When the temps dropped 20 degrees, we were pleased to find Tom's Place, a famous discount shop in the Kensington Market. And when **The Dixie Chicks** banned press from their after-screening dinner, we were just as happy to find the four-star Bymark restaurant on Wellington Street. If you closed your eyes for a minute, it was just like being in Manhattan — sort of.

The second best thing about Bymark, after the steak, was the two-minute underground walk back to the strangely creepy yet compellingly old-school Fairmont Royal York Hotel. But oh how nice it is to be back home ...