

Great Michael Shannon Performance Can't Thaw 'The Iceman'

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on May 16, 2013 - 11:09am

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Rating: **2.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Another great Michael Shannon performance should come as no surprise as everything he touches lately seems to be interesting, from “Take Shelter” to “Boardwalk Empire” to letters written by batshit crazy sorority girls. However, his increasingly impressive ability can't save “The Iceman,” a misguided, clichéd hitman flick that careens tonally and doesn't really justify its existence. It doesn't work as thriller or as drama, serving as little more than a performance piece for its talented star.

“The Iceman” was the alias for the notorious Richard Kuklinski, a seemingly average guy who happened to be a total psychopath. The most successful people find a way to turn their skills into financial assets and Kuklinski became one of the most notorious mob hitmen of the twentieth century after crossing paths with the legendary Roy DeMeo (Ray Liotta). Kuklinski worked at one of DeMeo's porn production houses and was there when an order was messed up and DeMeo's guys got rough. Kuklinski didn't even blink. In the film, DeMeo even says, “*Guy's cold as ice*” in case you didn't get it.



The Iceman

Photo credit: Millennium Pictures

However, “The Iceman” is not a story of an average guy being sucked into the glamour and financial allure of the mob. From the beginning, Kuklinski is more than a bit off. Director Ariel Vromen may start his film with a lovely first date between his protagonist and future wife Deborah (Winona Ryder) but the story quickly shifts to a billiards hall scene in which some poor schmuck decides to insult Richard. He slits his throat in the alley. And not for money. He's a maniac, plain and simple, and one of the problems with Vromen's film is that he doesn't seem to fully grasp that insanity at the core of a man who killed over 100 people. Richard wants to give his wife a better home. His father was abusive. These may be true but the modern movie justifications only muddy the waters and “The Iceman” is real dirty. Should we loathe Kuklinski?

Then why turn his kills into slo-mo montages? There's not enough grit here. Not enough honest darkness – just a movie version of a maniac.

Part of the problem comes in the tonally imbalanced story that Vroman chose to tell. We follow Kuklinski from that first meeting to his eventual arrest and we constantly bounce back and forth between his work (with supporting work by David Schwimmer as a mob tough guy and Chris Evans as another hitman nicknamed Mr. Softee) and his home life with a wife who the film argues had no idea what her husband did and two lovely daughters. As his profession gets closer to his personal life, the dramatic tension seems to come from the idea that we should want Kuklinski and his family to be protected. A scene in which a mobster threatens to reveal daddy's secrets at a birthday party is particularly annoying in that the same respect isn't remotely shown to the people that The Iceman killed. The film's fault isn't that it tells the story of a hitman/serial killer but that it does so in ways that seem to place him on a pedestal without ever getting underneath his skin. The film is reminiscent of Martin Scorsese's "GoodFellas" but that film understood its complex morality and the required tonal balance to make it work while Vroman's does not.



The Iceman

Photo credit: Millennium Pictures

It's too bad because Michael Shannon gives it his all. He's easily the best thing about "The Iceman" and the film's faults don't come back to him in any way. Once again, he makes choices that other actors wouldn't even consider, taking the subtle route where others would have chewed scenery. Don't worry. There's plenty of that on the fringe. Liotta has played this part so many times that it's just getting redundant. Schwimmer and Evans are miscast. And odd cameos by Stephen Dorff and James Franco are just distracting. As with most of "The Iceman," one element that works (Shannon's work) is balanced by those that don't (the rest of the performances). It's a film that's constantly in a tug of war. Is it the story of a maniac or a family man? A mob epic or a serious drama? A style piece or a gritty tale of murder? It ends up none of the above – just a performance piece for a great actor.

"The Iceman" stars Michael Shannon, Winona Ryder, Chris Evans, Ray Liotta, James Franco, David Schwimmer, Stephen Dorff, and Robert Davi. It was directed by Ariel Vroman. It is now playing in some markets and will be released in Chicago on May 17, 2013.



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By [BRIAN TALLERICO](#) [11]
Content Director
HollywoodChicago.com
brian@hollywoodchicago.com [10]

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