

‘The Family’ Whacks Obsession with Mafia Movies

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Rating: **1.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – “The Godfather” saga, “Goodfellas,” “Donnie Brasco,” “The Departed” – the list of America’s obsessive adoration of organized crime and mafia movies goes on and on. Finally, one film comes along to virtually kill the genre, the almost-unwatchable “The Family.”

Mostly the film is damn lazy, and wastes a great cast with a phone-it-in script and formulaic performances which follows that telephone line. It basically makes these cartoonish Italian stereotypes into heroic figures, while in any other parallel world they would be viewed as dangerous sociopaths. The violence and the killings are so random and accepted, that arguments could me made that popular culture IS causing our love affair with weapons. People are beaten and killed by “the family” with baseball bats, tennis rackets, hammers and of course guns, but most irritating is that there is the assumption that a Mafia Don and his shrewish wife would train their children to be little paragons of brutish criminal behavior. And that folks, is what they call entertainment, in the board rooms of film production companies.

Robert De Niro is Giovanni Manzoni (I kid you not), a Brooklyn Don who decided to snitch on his fellow Mafia rats. This has given the FBI carte blanche to use our tax dollars to relocate the Manzoni family from the South of France to Normandy, to keep one step ahead of the bounty on Manzoni’s head. There is the wife “Maggie” (Michelle Pfeiffer), who has a criminal attitude to match her hubby’s, and the children “Belle” (Dianna Agron) and “Warren” (John D’Leo). The family are now the “Blakes,” and Giovanni (“Fred”) develops a cover as a writer.



GoodFamily: Warren (John D’Leo), Maggie (Michelle Pfeiffer) and Belle (Dianna Agron) in ‘The Family’
Photo credit: Relativity Media

Old habits die hard with this clan. Maggie blows up a local grocery for talking down to her, Giovanni beats up a plumber for disrespecting him,

and the kids are either beating people or stealing from them. Apparently they moved to a town where no authority exists, save for their FBI surveillance team and their relocation agent, Robert (Tommy Lee Jones). This ain't your momma's Beaver Cleaver.

The kids are most annoying. Dianna Agron may be the most unlikely cast mafia princess that has ever existed in film history, yet she is portrayed as a knuckle baring sexual predator – she seduces a substitute teacher at her school in one of the most awkward love scenes in recent memory. Warren, portrayed by John D'Leo, is a super confident con man, who acts like a 50 year old numbers runner. He also has a bunch of strange hug scenes with his sister, which begs for an aforementioned beat down to take place.

There isn't much to say about Robert De Niro. He has sold himself out so many times he's actually come back around to respectability – the audience respects his ability to cash a paycheck. The ONLY intriguing thing in the film is that Giovanni begins to actually write his memoirs – that's how he comes up with the writer cover – but the story drops that angle like a fetid cannoli. The device seemed like part of a better movie, or the best part of this wretched exercise, it can't be determined.

Michelle Pfeiffer seems to have disappeared from popular culture, but here she is basically reprising her "Angela De Marco" character in 1988's "Married to the Mob," except now with crow's feet and no wit. It gets to the point in the movie that we don't understand her motivations whatsoever. Is she the brains behind the brawn, or the brawn with no brains? The narrative keeps enticing us with possibilities, only to flatten them whenever there seems to be something savory about "Maggie." They did allow for the stereotype of Pfeiffer's Italian Momma character as an awesome pasta chef. Bon appétit.



Flashback: Giovanni (Robert De Niro) and Maggie During Better Days in 'The Family'
Photo credit: Relativity Media

Director and co-writer Luc Besson, who once upon a time directed a classic film called "La Femme Nikita" (1990), puts more hackery in this script – adapted from a book – than a high school adaptation of "Mean Streets." None of the characters are developed, even with some backstory thrown in, and all the good parts seemed copied from Martin Scorsese – Besson even references a far superior Mafia film that Marty once directed. What was the point of all this, except for an easy green light once De Niro, Pfeiffer and the Mafia were pitched?

As I was leaving the general public preview of the film, a woman was answering the question from a publicist on did she like the film or not. She said she did, as I listened in, crestfallen. I thought to myself, "The sentence is a Netflix queue and a download of 'Godfather 2' or 'Goodfellas,' in which crime has consequences and nuance!" And keep that word of mouth regarding "The Family" to yourself, or you sleep with the fishes.

"The Family" opens everywhere on September 13th. Featuring Robert De Niro, Michelle Pfeiffer, Tommy Lee Jones, Dianna Agron, John D'Leo and Vincent Pastore. Screenplay adapted by Luc Besson and Michael Caleo. Directed by Luc Besson. Rated "R"



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By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [18]
Senior Staff Writer
HollywoodChicago.com
pat@hollywoodchicago.com [17]

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