

Jessica Chastain, Oscar Isaac Endure 'A Most Violent Year'

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- [1981](#) [2]
- [A Most Violent Year](#) [3]
- [A24](#) [4]
- [Albert Brooks](#) [5]
- [Alessandro Nivola](#) [6]
- [Corruption](#) [7]
- [David Oyelowo](#) [8]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [9]
- [J.C. Chandor](#) [10]
- [Jessica Chastain](#) [11]
- [Movie Review](#) [12]
- [New York City](#) [13]
- [Oscar Isaac](#) [14]
- [Patrick McDonald](#) [15]



Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – The effect of violence, centering on the roughest statistical year for it (1981) in New York City history, becomes a flashpoint for the way business has always been done. If someone isn't intimidating their competitor with lawyers or shady marketing practices, a few hired goons can do the trick. Oscar Isaac takes the beating, both real and metaphorical, in writer/director J.C. Chandor's "A Most Violent Year."

This is a slow but decent allegory that doesn't really come to any stark conclusions about New York City's propensity for strong-arm competitive practices, except to say it's business as usual. Oscar Isaac is shown to be one tough hombre, and is backed up by his moll – portrayed by Jessica Chastain with an in-and-out New York accent – and the film does have a vibe like "The Godfather," in a sense that America's wealth was built on survival of the fittest, like nature, and that survival depends on power, threats and intimidation.

Oscar Isaac is Abel Morales, an immigrant who has built a heating oil delivery company. Relying on instinct, he sets up a deal for a key riverside property that will expand his business to the next level. This doesn't sit well with his competitors, as they begin to intimidate the drivers of Abel's oil trucks. These threats start to unravel the property deal, much to the chagrin of Abel's lawyer (Albert Brooks) and his trophy wife Anna (Jessica Chastain).



Oscar Isaac and Jessica Chastain in 'A Most Violent Year'

Photo credit: A24

When the district attorney (David Oyelowo) gets involved, Abel's accounting practices are also put into the intimidation mix. The struggle brings out the street fighter in Abel, and he begins his own strategy of fighting back. In the year 1981, where the moral decay and the violence are at their peak in the City of New York, the only way to survive is an eye for an eye.

This is an absorbing story, much like writer/director Chandor's previous efforts, "Margin Call" and last year's "All is Lost." Like "Margin Call," it deals with the efforts of businessmen to remain above water while their competitors drown, and like "All is Lost," it focuses on one individual's efforts to survive when it seems like no options are left. Thematically, it takes on the continuing war in New York City, where the strong endure and the weak live in Queens.

Oscar Isaac, last prominently featured in "Inside Llewyn Davis," actually has a similar role in "A Most Violent Year," except instead of being a morose folk singer he is a morose oil delivery businessman. The two roles are completely different, but Isaac has a darkness in his performance demeanor that adds an extra level of character angst. Even in victory, he seems to have lost.

Jessica Chastain, completing her 100th film of 2014 (or maybe it only feels that way) was a miscast as a tough-talking, outer borough dame. Her "New Yawk" accent gets in the way of itself several times, and she doesn't fit the image of the role she was playing, nor did she convincingly perform her way beyond that awkward fit. Compare this performance with Jennifer Lawrence's similar role in "American Hustle" – in which she understood the soul of the hard-as-nails gal – and the flaws of the too-soft Chastain are glaringly apparent.



Breaking Bread in 'A Most Violent Year'

Photo credit: A24

J.C. Chandor is obviously interested in situations where a character (or situation, as in "Margin Call") is up against the ropes, and it's almost like it doesn't matter that this story occurs in New York City's most violent year, except as a backdrop for the ineffectiveness of any type of law enforcement. This "street struggle" occurs everyday – it's called life – and Abel's journey is simply one individual instance of everybody's journey.

There are eight million stories in the Naked City, as the old TV show used to say, and that's what makes New York what it is, a society where the "dog eats dog," and "if you can make it there you can make it anywhere"...among other meanderings designed as honest survival advice.

"A Most Violent Year" opens everywhere on January 16th. Featuring Jessica Chastain, Oscar Isaac, Alessandro Nivola, David Oyelowo and Albert Brooks. Written and directed by J.C. Chandor. Rated "R"



[16]

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- [2] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/1981>
- [3] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/a-most-violent-year>
- [4] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/a24>
- [5] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/albert-brooks>
- [6] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/alessandro-nivola>
- [7] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/corruption>
- [8] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/david-oyelowo>
- [9] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/hollywoodchicagocom-content>
- [10] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/jc-chandor>
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