

## ‘Papillon’ Still Packs a Classic & Compelling Story

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – The remarkable true-ish story of “Papillon” is difficult to mess up. Henri Charrière published the “autobiographical novel” in 1969, and the first film version dropped in 1973, with Steve McQueen and Dustin Hoffman as the two leads no less. The latest film has Charlie Hunnam and Rami Malek in those leads, as two French prisoners constantly trying to escape.

The film does suffer from comparison to the first version (directed by veteran Franklin J. Schaffner), but it is still a well-done unfolding of a audacious prison “adventure.” The French word for butterfly, “Papillon,” is the nickname of Charrière, a prisoner in the French Guiana (Devil’s Island) system from 1931 to 1945. He spent his whole time there trying to escape, in broader and more interesting schemes. The movie exploits that aspect of the story, and created some nice scenarios in letting them play out. Hunnam and Malek (“Mr. Robot”) won’t make anybody forget McQueen and Hoffman, but they do interesting work in their go at it... in essence, the story is compelling enough to justify a remake.

Charlie Hunnam is Henri “Papillon” Charrière (so nicknamed for his butterfly tattoo) is a small time safe cracker who can’t help pilfering a cut from his Parisian mob boss. When this is discovered, he is framed for murder, and sentenced to the French Guiana prison system... which includes Devil’s Island. He is determined to escape, and is paired with fellow prisoner Louie Dega (Rami Malek) in that pursuit.



Papillon (Charlie Hunnam) and Louie Dega (Rami Malek) in ‘Papillon’



Photo credit: Bleecker Street Media

They are up against Warden Barrot (Yorick van Wageningen), a sadistic and no nonsense guardian of the system. When Papillon tries his first escape, he is caught, and does two years of solitary confinement. He tries again, and again is caught. But it never breaks him, and he keeps at it until a result is imminent. His tenacity, and companionship for Louie Dega, is what drives him.

The two leads have fine chemistry, which makes the story a bit smoother than it should have been on its surface. Rami Malek is particularly memorable as Louie, and compares well to Hoffman’s interpretation. His characterization is precise and surprising at the same time, and his prison partnership becomes a centerpiece for Papillon’s existence. Charlie Hunnam is not as matinee-idol forward as McQueen, but who was? His Papillon is Christ-like and cut like a athlete, which is intriguing and weird at the same time.

It’s hard to fathom the prison systems of the first half of the 20th Century, buried between the world wars and the reform movements of the 1960s and ‘70s. Prisons themselves don’t essentially change, the difference with Papillon is the remoteness of his incarceration... it trapped a man while taunting him with a freedom that was right in front of him. P’s obsession with the escape is the motivating factor in the story, and that overindulgence does keep the focus within the narrative.



The Desperate Conditions in the Prison System of ‘Papillon’

Photo credit: Bleecker Street Media

Where the film falters is in its listlessness. There is a long circumstance during Papillon’s first time in solitary confinement that gets bizarre (he has hallucinations) and doesn’t really come to a conclusion, except he serves his time. When he goes a second time, it isn’t as long, but that could have been the more interesting stint. It was the scattered nature of what the production focused on versus what they didn’t that created an dull atmosphere, even though nothing they were doing was dull on paper.

The reason that this remake is compared to the 1973 film is that the first version is well remembered, both for its classic stars and grittiness that was unusual for the era. Remaking the story again was legitimate, but it needed more of its own identity. In the crowded movie marketplace, standing out – and escaping from the past – is the only way to go.

*“Papillon” opened everywhere on August 24th. Featuring Charlie Hunnam, Rami Malek, Eve Hewson, Michael Socha and Yorick van Wageningen. Screenplay adapted by Aaron Guzikowski. Directed by Michael Noer. Rated “R”*



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