

Johnny Depp's 'Public Enemies' Delivers Bona Fide Chicago Powerhouse

Submitted by [HollywoodChicago.com](http://www.hollywoodchicago.com) [1] on July 1, 2009 - 2:24pm

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Was John Dillinger an Adolf Hitler-level criminal mastermind or a modern-day Robin Hood superman? In the authentic reality portrayed by the god-like Johnny Depp in the Chicago-filmed “Public Enemies,” he’s a little bit of both for blockbuster filmmaker Michael Mann.

Unfortunately, Depp’s nemesis – special agent Melvin Purvis as played by “The Dark Knight” mainstay Christian Bale – falls flat. Bale rolls through the motions with a monotone and monotonous role that needed the tension of a World War conflict rather than a rubber band.



Christian Bale stars as special agent Melvin Purvis – the nemesis of the legendary Depression-era outlaw John Dillinger – in “Public Enemies” from filmmaker Michael Mann.
Photo credit: Universal Pictures

The French actress Marion Cotillard, on the other hand, delivers yet another intoxicating performance as Billie Frechette this time in a supporting role. We’re reminded why she ever-so-definitely deserved her 2008 Oscar for so absolutely embodying Edith Piaf in 2007’s “La Vie en Rose”.

Leelee Sobieski is thrown in toward the end as the downplayed character Polly Hamilton in a relatively wasted and unnecessary cameo. In addition, Matt Craven – who you’ve almost certainly never heard of, has no relation to Wes Craven and looks strikingly like Sean Penn – is merely being mentioned in this review for the three aforementioned points of comedy.

Giovanni Ribisi from “My Name is Earl,” “Friends” and the underrated film “Heaven” (that too many people haven’t seen but should rent tomorrow) methodically portrays Alvin “Creepy” Karpis. While John Dillinger was public enemy No. 1 for the FBI, Karpis was the final public enemy to be nailed.



Johnny Depp as the legendary Depression-era outlaw John Dillinger in “Public Enemies” from filmmaker Michael Mann.

Photo credit: Peter Mountain, Universal Pictures

Karpis’ capture catapulted FBI director J. Edgar Hoover – portrayed with spot-on calculation by Billy Crudup of “Watchmen” and “Almost Famous” fame – and the FBI to national eminence. In the “Public Enemies” period piece, J. Edgar Hoover and his FBI both have a tall task: proving to the American government and people that they should exist and are competent crime stoppers.

The FBI takes on John Dillinger’s infamous bank-robbing gang as well as other high-profile public enemies (including Stephen Graham as Baby Face Nelson and Channing Tatum as Pretty Boy Floyd) as a launch pad for proving that their government jobs should exist and be handsomely funded.

While moviegoers clearly pack a love-or-hate relationship for Christian Bale following his long career of hit-or-miss films, Johnny Depp typically draws universal appeal at the box office from fans of all ages and genders. Depp’s deep, crazed, complicated and multi-dimensional portrayal of John Dillinger makes this film worth buying into for his performance alone.



Johnny Depp (left) and Marion Cotillard in "Public Enemies" from filmmaker Michael Mann.

Photo credit: Peter Mountain, Universal Pictures

While the camera always loves Depp's face and he's never tough to look at, WGA writers Michael Mann, Ronan Bennett and Ann Biderman grace Depp with a bevy of potent material. He confidently crows in the film, for example, that he can rob a bank with his dogged posse in 100 seconds "flat".

When Bale first meets and confronts Depp in jail one of the many times he's captured before later escaping, Depp attempts to delve into Bale's head about "what keeps him up at night" and whether the images of all the criminals he's captured and killed haunt his dreams. When Bale turns the question back on Depp, the demented Depp only says one witty word: "coffee".

Likewise, Dillinger's balls-to-the-wall and aggressively confrontational criminal character is best exemplified by a scene when Depp walks right into a Chicago police department in the light of the day and without a guise.



Johnny Depp (middle) and Marion Cotillard in "Public Enemies" from filmmaker Michael Mann.

Photo credit: Universal Pictures

Intrigued by finding the office of a special task force devoted singularly to his incarceration, he strolls through it at a snail's pace and asks a gaggle of cops "what's the score?" of a baseball game they're listening to on the radio. They don't even notice who's asking.

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The seminal moment in Chicago at the Biograph Theater – where Dillinger dangerously attends the 1934 film “Manhattan Melodrama” with Polly Hamilton – climatically executes with authenticity, tension and grainy, “you are there” cinematography.

Despite scores of cinematic achievements and veritable character representations, “Public Enemies” loses points on its pacing. Some moviegoers might find themselves feeling the film as episodic with an internal build to a climax rather than a more external and outwardly visual manufacture of events.

Certain scenes sometimes felt too ignorant even for the times, too.

While everyone knew what was really happening during the Holocaust but many were brainwashed into denying, ignoring or overlooking the mass genocide that was taking place right before their eyes, a naïveté by people who would have benefitted by turning Dillinger in sometimes felt forced and histrionic.

Despite such minor strikes and overlooking a yawn of a performance by Christian Bale, “Public Enemies” indeed stars two decisive characters among 2009’s best so far: Johnny Depp and the meticulously recreated environment that is the city of Chicago itself.

“Public Enemies” from director Michael Mann stars Johnny Depp, Christain Bale, Marion Cotillard, Leelee Sobieski, Giovanni Ribisi, Billy Crudup, Channing Tatum, James Russo, Stephen Dorff, Stephen Graham, Bill Camp, Chandler Williams, Branka Katic, Jason Clarke, Christian Stolte and David Wenham. The film, which was released nationwide on July 1, 2009, is rated “R” for gangster violence and some language with a 140-minute running time.



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Source URL (retrieved on Apr 25 2024 - 1:09am):
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