

Blu-ray Review: Leonardo DiCaprio Shines in Clint Eastwood's 'J. Edgar'

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CHICAGO – With all due respect to Damián Bichir, George Clooney, Jean Dujardin, Gary Oldman and Brad Pitt, I believe that the three best lead performances by an actor in 2011 were entirely overlooked by the Academy. None of the five Oscar nominees quite managed to top Michael Shannon in “Take Shelter,” Michael Fassbender in “Shame” or Leonardo DiCaprio in “J. Edgar.”

While I'll admit that “J. Edgar” is wildly inferior to the aforementioned titles, there's no denying the level of ambition in DiCaprio's stunningly immersive portrayal of the titular FBI director. This picture marks the first time DiCaprio's distractingly boyish features have entirely vanished within the hardened exterior of an embittered adult whose youth got lost in the shuffle. Though his accent initially sounds a bit labored, DiCaprio quickly eases into the uncomfortable skin of a man who projected his inner shame onto everyone he deemed a threat.



Blu-ray Rating: **3.0/5.0**

The term “communism” haunted J. Edgar Hoover throughout his life and appeared to be his primary motivator in obsessively logging and filing data on perceived criminal activity. After witnessing brutal acts of terrorism while growing up near the nation's capital, Hoover's methodical mind naturally became hard-wired for seeking justice. But over the five decades he spent heading the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Hoover's paranoia overtook his common sense and led him to demonize anything that deviated from the norm, including the civil rights movement. He allegedly kept blackmail files on people in the highest ranks of American government, which may explain why he was never sacked during his 50-year term. Since the film unapologetically delves into his history of corruption, it's odd that the FBI chose to criticize the picture solely for its restrained portrayal of Hoover's repressed homosexuality and the romantic relationship he supposedly had with his close assistant, FBI associate director Clyde Tolson (played by Armie Hammer). This aspect of Hoover's personal life will come as no surprise to anyone with even a casual interest in history, and director Clint Eastwood's approach to the material is as even-handed and respectful as his finest work to date, 2006's “Letters from Iwo Jima.”



Leonardo DiCaprio stars in Clint Eastwood's J. Edgar.

Photo credit: Keith Bernstein

Screenwriter Dustin Lance Black (Oscar-winner for "Milk") flips a bit too frequently between various points of Hoover's life, some of which turn out to be fictionalized by the man's own fabrications. Hoover thought of himself as a gun-toting law enforcer who personally took down powerful thugs like John Dillinger, when in fact he was merely the figurehead that gave out orders. Yet his involvement in the "G-Men" franchise helped popularize law enforcers at a time when criminality was romanticized on the big screen. His lifelong belief in the "end justifying the means" is eerily mirrored by the justifications of countless modern politicians for duping the public.

As he did in his underrated portrayal of Howard Hughes in Martin Scorsese's "The Aviator," DiCaprio nails the wounded spirit of a tortured relic whose tireless determination was fatally fused with overpowering delusions. He's well matched by Hammer, and the two actors excel in scenes where their feelings for one another threaten to break free. Naomi Watts lends her icily entrancing grace to the relatively thankless role of Hoover's secretary and confidant, Helen Gandy, while Judi Dench exudes arsenic-tinged angst as Hoover's mother, who replies that she'd rather have a dead son than a gay one. There are distinct echoes of Norman Bates in a scene where Hoover tries on his dead mother's clothes, but Eastwood never derails the story into laughable camp.



Marred by unconvincing makeup and overly deliberate pacing, "J. Edgar" is far from top-drawer Eastwood, but it easily bests his last two flawed efforts, "Invictus" and "Hereafter." This is a serious and provocative drama that is bound to inspire great post-film discussion among viewers who bothered to stay awake.

"J. Edgar" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 2.4:1 aspect ratio), accompanied by English and French audio tracks, and includes a Blu-ray, DVD and Ultraviolet Digital Copy of the film. What it doesn't include is any satisfying extras aside from a truly lackluster featurette, "J. Edgar: The Most Powerful Man in the World," heralded on the cover for being an "intimate and compelling portrait," which couldn't be further from the truth. It merely assembles 18 minutes of rumors and speculation from the cast and crew. Eastwood seems so conflicted about his own beliefs regarding Hoover that we get no sense of why he even bothered to make a film about him in the first place. DiCaprio's observations are much more clear-cut, as he succinctly summarizes Hoover's life by declaring it as "a series of misguided intentions."

Gandy is singled out as the person whose silence over the years has invited endless theories about the secrets Hoover had ordered her to run through the shredder. There are hints that Black and Eastwood may have had differing opinions about the nature of Hoover and Tolson, but the featurette never probes into any material that could be deemed controversial. Instead, it scrambles to find reasons to praise Hoover—such as his computer-like intellect that managed to organize the Library of Congress and kick-start the utilization of scientific fingerprint identification. Veteran character actor (and occasional "CSI" star) Denis O'Hare reminds us that without Hoover, there wouldn't be any "CSI." One can only dream.

'J. Edgar' is released by Warner Home Video and stars Leonardo DiCaprio, Armie Hammer, Naomi Watts, Ed Westwick, Josh Lucas and Judi Dench. It was written by Dustin Lance Black and directed by Clint Eastwood. It was released on Feb. 21, 2012. It is rated R.



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