

'True Story' Just Leaves a False Impression

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on April 19, 2015 - 2:02pm

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Rating: **2.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Sometimes, just casting a film with “names” is not enough to make it work. Jonah Hill and James Franco play cat-and-mouse for 100 minutes in “True Story,” but the narrative, the structure and their own inability to communicate their characters conspired against the overall experience.

The problem is the foregone conclusion, that scene after scene in the film just keeps setting up. There is no meat to this insidious based-on-truth story as it unfolds, and it devolves into a series of confrontations between characters that just become more convenient – as far as revealing the secrets of a criminal mind – and culminating in a trial that seemed already adjudicated, given the events leading up to it. Jonah Hill and James Franco are both miscast in their respective lead roles, lacking the necessary presence to portray a journalist and a smooth felon, and just made the weak screenplay adaption that much more annoying.

New York Times journalist Michael Finkel (Jonah Hill) is summarily fired after a story he condensed for dramatic effect is exposed as untrue. He runs back to his fiancée Jill (Felicity Jones) to lick his wounds, but soon gets caught up in another story. Christian Longo (James Franco) is a man who is accused of killing his wife and children, but something doesn't seem right about him or the story.



Michael Finkel (Jonah Hill) Confers with Christian Longo (James Franco) in 'True Story'

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight Pictures

Seeking a chance at redemption, Finkel becomes involved in the events leading up to Longo's trial, with a juicy book offer to pursue it to the end. In the meantime, Longo is ingratiating himself with the journalist, and begins to plant doubt about the circumstances of the murders. Between the prosecution of the crime and Finkel's determination to vet Longo, the truth of "True Story" becomes blurred.

Generally, Jonah Hill is a more than competent dramatic actor (see his Oscar-nominated turn in "Moneyball"), but in this film he is so tentative, and didn't fit within the profile of a muddled reporter. For the last quarter of the film, and at the trial, he is reduced to a series of grimaces and muttering curses under his breath. In his evolution as a dramatic actor, this role is a definite "push."

And James Franco is beginning to strike me as an actor who theorizes his role rather than performs it. His mugging as Longo is annoyingly comparable to his younger brother Dave, and that is not a good thing. Franco, like Hill, doesn't have a grasp on what makes his sociopath character tick, which means nothing will be revealed except what is on the paper (again, weak). The conclusion is that James Franco is only as good as his collaborator, and he can't rise above soft material.

Director Rupert Goold – who also adapted the screenplay from Michael Finkel's book – is making his major feature debut, and the rookie mistakes are all over the film. The hot performer Felicity Jones is reduced to the "girlfriend" role, but is pulled into the story with serious pretzel logic. This leads into the "confrontation" with Franco's character, that serves not the story, but only the drama of the actors who are involved. There are two small character roles – the judge at the trial and a relative of Longo's victims – who overact in their small show-off scenes, and Goold didn't have enough experience to reign it in. Journalists are also portrayed as secular saints, a status so past its expiration date that the smelly corpse needs to be buried, stat.



James Franco as Longo in Custody for 'True Story'

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight Pictures

Finding something to hang onto in the film, however, wasn't that difficult. The crime itself, so hideous on the surface, does speak to the frustration of "the family" in an age of make-enough-income-or-doom in the domestic unit. Director Goold did have a stylish hand within his awkward story structure, and his shots of Felicity Jones spoke to his admiration of her ability to let the camera love her.

But in the end the film felt like a roll of the dice. Rather than creating a strong story from the beginning, it was about getting the right "brand" of actors put into place, securing Fox Searchlight Films (their "serious film" subsidiary) as the distributor, and hoping for the best. That is not confident film-making.

"True Story" is now in theaters. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Jonah Hill, James Franco, Felicity Jones and Gretchen Moi. Screenplay adapted and directed by Rupert Goold. Rated "R"



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