

REVIEW



NOT-SO-MOD SQUAD

IN THE HISTORY OF HOLLYWOOD violence, *Gangster Squad* scored a footnote when it was pulled from a September release, after the Aurora shooting, for a scene in which gangsters machine-gunned their way through the Grauman's Chinese Theatre screen. It arrives in the January lull shorn of that conceit (which can still be seen online), but you can't help wondering if director Ruben Fleischer (*Zombieland*) cried at that snip. That's the kind of sick joke that gets him going.

This is not to say that *Gangster Squad* stints on violence: we first meet former Bugsy Siegel lieutenant Mickey Cohen (Sean Penn) drawing-and-halving some poor schnook behind the Hollywoodland sign. Sgt. John O'Mara (Josh Brolin) is out to stop this psychopathic racketeer, and LAPD Chief "Whiskey Bill" Parker (Nick Nolte) has suggested he leave his badge at home and form an off-the-books team, using his WWII guerrilla training to take down Cohen.

They're the usual motley crew: the wiretapping wiz (Giovanni Ribisi), the beat cop from the 'hood (Anthony Mackie), and a Texan plucked off the cover of *True Detective* (Robert Patrick) and his Mexican sidekick (Michael Peña). The final addition is reluctant Sgt. Jerry Wooters (Ryan Gosling), "a sheep in wolf's clothing" who has fallen for Cohen's latest tomato (Emma Stone) and is galvanized into

action by the sort of melodrama that would be right at home in a '30s Warner Bros. program.

With crackling dialogue by former LAPD gang investigator Will Beall, working from journalist Paul Lieberman's nonfiction book, *Gangster Squad* is an enjoyable throwback, distinguishing itself from film noir with its deliriously colorful theme-park recreation of 1949 LA and Dion Beebe's burnished lighting, which makes Brolin and Penn look like they've been cast in bronze. Penn acts like it too; jutting his head forward like an ostrich (so as not to be confused with De Niro's side-cocked Capone), his Cohen is a feral, joyless cipher. He's no match for Brolin, whose Dick Tracy chin has never been put to better use. Gosling and Stone, revisiting their easy chemistry in *Crazy, Stupid, Love*, provide that anachronistic relatability.

Gangster Squad is no *L.A. Confidential*, nor is it much of a history lesson, compressing some 15 years (part of which Cohen spent in jail) into a few months.

But it's a diverting look at police work pre-Miranda Rights but not pre-Carmen Miranda (Yvette Tucker). And if Fleischer's gallows humor feels out of place and his aestheticized bloodbaths distasteful, blame your discomfort on the off-screen debate that has rendered Hollywood no longer untouchable.

—ANN LEWINSON ✉ UNSPLICED@GMAIL.COM

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GANGSTER SQUAD

Directed by Ruben Fleischer :: Written by Will Beall based on the book *Gangster Squad* by Paul Lieberman :: With Sean Penn, Josh Brolin, Emma Stone, Ryan Gosling, and Yvette Tucker :: 113 minutes :: Warner Bros.

Boston Common + Fenway + suburbs

RETROSPECTIVE

CANNY CARNIE

Pierre Étaix is a carnie. Literally: except for time spent directing five feature films in the 1960s, he's made his living in the circus. But in that decade, riffing on the conventions of silent comedy with battle-tested command of the craft, he rushed off an oeuvre as distinctive as any other in the French New Wave.

But Chaplin, Keaton, Tati... Étaix? It may seem hyperbolic to put him in that company, but his work, revived for the first time in four decades and presented in this MFA retrospective, places him in a direct lineage with the masters. He takes the form — the elaborate pratfalls, the hapless male protagonist (which he plays himself), the archaic elegance — and puts an era-appropriate, absurdist stamp on it. Hell, he eviscerates the bourgeoisie with a scorn that would make Godard and Buñuel proud.

And never better than in *Yoyo* (1965, January 13 @ 3 pm + January 16 @ 5:45 pm), where he tracks two generations of a wealthy family of entertainers through half a century. In its most daring conceit, the film

THE FILMS OF PIERRE ÉTAIX

Museum of Fine Arts
January 11-18

starts silent, gains dialogue as the age of talkies (and the Depression) approaches, and then

adopts a faster pace — and a greater sense of societal dissatisfaction — as television dominates the culture in act three. In this way he uses past aesthetics for both surface pleasures and biting subtext. It's history as contextualized by comedy — a fitting magnum opus for a clown.

—JAKE MULLIGAN

