

The physician at the movies

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Jersey Boys

Starring John Lloyd Young, Erich Bergen, Vincent Piazza, and Michael Lamenda.

Directed by Clint Eastwood. Rated R for language. Running time 134 minutes.

This film is not just for fans of Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons but also for those who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s listening to “Sherry,” “Walk Like a Man,” “Can’t Take My Eyes Off You,” “Dawn,” “Big Girls Don’t Cry,” “December 1963 (Oh What a Night),” and many of their other hits, most of which featured Valli’s falsetto, the group’s trademark. I came away amazed by the group’s sheer productivity, attested to by their worldwide sales of 175 million records.

The film is directed by Clint Eastwood whose fascination with jazz led him to direct *Bird* about the ill-fated Charlie Parker. Although not a fan of rock and roll, he did like this group and championed the film’s production.¹ *Jersey Boys* is based on a story that originally appeared in a stage show that

won four Tony awards in 2005 and is still running on Broadway and in national touring productions, as well as in London. While the stage show was sixty percent music, the film is about forty percent.² Filming it allowed Eastwood to focus on the interplay between the members of the group. It also is more candid than the stage production, which didn’t reveal much of the group members’ early lives.

The film opens in Newark, picturing the group as what used to be called “juvenile delinquents” who collect stolen goods that supposedly “fell off the delivery truck.” Two of them, Tommy DeVito (Vincent Piazza) and Nick Massi (Michael Lamenda), are shown going in and out of jail. One feature of these early scenes that I didn’t particularly like was DeVito, the group’s bad boy, letting loose with F-bombs which mercifully abated when the film’s focus shifted more to principal songwriter Bob Gaudio (Erich Bergen) and to Valli himself (John Lloyd Young).

That these young men became renowned singers rather than small-time mobsters is in some respects a version of the Horatio Alger story in which hard work, determination, and a

John Lloyd Young (as Frankie Valli), Erich Bergen (as Bob Gaudio), Vincent Piazza (as Tommy De Vito), and Michael Lomenda (as Nick Massi) in *Jersey Boys*. © Warner Bros.



few good breaks led to success. That success had a dark side and came at a price, including addiction to drugs and alcohol, wild parties, cheating on spouses, absence from home, and Valli's neglect of his two daughters as they were growing up. The toll it takes on his family is particularly poignant as his daughter, a talented singer, runs away from home, gets into drugs, and dies of an overdose. In his grief, all he can say is that "your children shouldn't die before you." What is left out is that Valli was married and divorced three times and that a step-daughter died the same year as his first daughter.

The link between the Mafia and entertainment industry has been well documented in the life of that other Jersey Boy whom Valli idolized and hoped to surpass, Frank Sinatra, whose connections with the mob included the Copacabana in New York City as well as the Las Vegas and Cuban gambling/entertainment empires.³ The Four Seasons' connections were considerably smaller, in the persona of "Gyp" DeCarlo, a local gambler and numbers runner, played by the only recognizable Hollywood actor, Christopher Walken, who adds a nice touch of lightness and steadiness to the film. DeCarlo promises Valli's mother to keep Valli out of trouble. He also brokers a deal for the group to survive after DeVito gambles away their profits and Valli feels obliged to go solo to pay off the loan shark.

Eastwood chose almost his entire cast from the various stage companies.² That probably was a good idea because they had internalized the story by playing their roles hundreds if not a thousand times. The scenes divulging how the group got its name and Frankie became Valli, rather than Valley, are particularly amusing. If you look carefully you can see Eastwood in an episode of the television series *Rawhide* which launched his career. He called it "a sneaky way of making a Hitchcock appearance."¹ One very effective technique Eastwood used was allowing the story to be told from the vantage point of the different singers. At the end of the movie, each group member talks directly to the audience giving his own point of view. The tagline is "Everybody remembers it how they need to." This is an interesting way to conclude the story. Left unsaid is whether all those record sales, the election to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1990, the pleasure the group brought to many fans over the years, and the fame were worth the personal tragedies that came along with them.

References

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2. Cohen S. A show sticks with its homeboys. *Wall Street J* 2014 Jun 13: D4.
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Addendum

Growing up in New York City In the 1950s, I had a few degrees of separation from those reputed to be in the Mafia. In addition to many graduates of my high school, La Salle

Military Academy, who served in the military or succeeded in business and the professions, it had graduates who became well-known, such as John Sununu, Chief of Staff of George H. W. Bush; John Zuccotti, deputy mayor of New York; Marcos McGrath, Archbishop of Panama; Peter O'Malley, son of Walter O'Malley, owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers and later owner of the LA Dodgers; the Somozas, presidents of Nicaragua; and director John Frankenheimer (see my review of his movie *The Train* below). There were also many young men from the families reputed to be Mafia. They were no different from a lot of other kids and I had no contact with their world; they were just in the same school.

My mother was an Italian and Spanish interpreter in the courts (Special Sessions, General Sessions, the State Supreme court). Through her I met and dated the daughter of one of the prominent defense lawyers and was introduced to a world where if she wanted impossible-to-get tickets for *My Fair Lady* starring Julie Andrews or *Gypsy* with Ethel Merman, orchestra seats suddenly appeared. Despite living in a tenement and a housing project almost the whole decade, I have to say that the 1950s in New York City was a magical time. Cue "Manhattan."

The Monuments Men

Starring George Clooney, Matt Damon, Bill Murray, John Goodman, Cate Blanchett, and Bob Balaban.

Directed by George Clooney. **Rated** PG-13. **Running time** 118 minutes.

This film was almost uniformly panned. With a \$70 million budget, personable and talented actors, a cast of thousands, as well as lavish costumes and cinematography, what could possibly go wrong? Have the same person be the producer, director, screenwriter, and leading star—and not just any person but a paparazzi and fan favorite. The result is a George Clooney vanity piece even to the extent that his father, Nick Clooney, a host of a PBS nostalgia music series, closes the picture walking hand in hand with his grandson down a church aisle into the sunshine after a visit to the Madonna of Bruges. The screenplay is based "loosely" on the book *The Monuments Men: Allied Heroes, Nazi Thieves, and the Greatest Treasure Hunt in History* by Robert Edsel. In one of the DVD's special features, Matt Damon says that they didn't want the movie to be a history lesson but rather more like a buddy movie or a heist picture. They succeeded. By the movie's end, I had learned almost nothing about this group of art aficionados tasked by President Roosevelt to save the precious art works being stolen or destroyed by the Nazis. We are told that the best of the lot were destined to be in a museum to be built after the war in Linz, Austria, the birthplace of the Führer.

The picture opens with Frank Stokes (George Clooney) getting FDR's permission to form the unit. The film then flashes briefly to Paris in March 1943, where Gestapo Major Stahl (Justus von Dohnányi) escorts Hermann Göring (Udo



George Clooney directed and starred in *The Monuments Men*. © Columbia Pictures.

Kroschwald) in one of his twenty or so visits to the Musée Jeu de Paume. Stahl asks his assistant Claire Simone (Cate Blanchett) to get another champagne glass—she and her fellow worker spit in it before pouring the champagne for the Germans.

Stokes recruits old buddies in the art world: James Granger (Matt Damon), Richard Campbell (Bill Murray), Walter Garfield (John Goodman), and Preston Savitz (Bob Balaban). All must undergo basic training, which is played for laughs as buddies might do, not those who intend to go to the front. Goodman wouldn't have lasted a day of training

They land at Normandy months after the D-Day invasion and join their French and British counterparts Jean Claude Clermont (Jean Dujardin) and Donald Jeffries (Hugh Bonneville). The film becomes very disjointed as Stokes splits the group into pairs and sends them to Bruges, Ghent, and other sites to locate an altarpiece and a statue of the Madonna and Child. The retrieval of these two treasures closes the movie. Unfortunately, the Frenchman and the Brit aren't there to see the fruits of their labors—they take foolish chances and are killed.

Somehow Campbell and Savitz land at Bastogne in December 1944, where Campbell receives a copy of his wife singing "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," sung by Judy Garland in the 1944 musical *Meet Me in St. Louis*. It is played on the camp's sound system while he showers. That in itself is hard to believe, but insult was added to injury when they used the version containing lyrics that were changed in 1957 by Frank Sinatra from "We'll muddle through somehow" to "Hang a shining star up on the highest bough." Oops!

Granger meets Simone, whose brother was in the Maquis

(the French Resistance). She gives him the book in which she recorded the location of every painting. She offers to spend the night with him even though he is married. "This is Paris after all," she says. He politely declines. Chalk one up for Granger/Matt Damon. The book reveals that many paintings have been stored in the salt and copper mines and in a castle. There, they find not just art, but gold bullion, and lots of gold teeth. Later Stokes finds a Gestapo officer destroying paintings and interrogates him. The war being just concluded, the German knows he doesn't have to talk. Stokes tells him that he knows that he ran a concentration camp. The German asks if he's Jewish. When Stokes says no, the German says, "Then you should thank me." Stokes tells him that every morning back in New York he goes for a bagel and that, in one of his morning rituals, he hopes to find on page 18 of the *Times* that the German has been executed for war crimes. This is my vote for the most inauthentic scene out of a myriad of candidates.

To give the film some props they do raise the question if saving art is worth anyone's life. They conclude that the two dead group members would have said yes. The question is even more forcibly posed in John Frankenheimer's *The Train*.

The Train (1964)

Starring Burt Lancaster, Paul Scofield, Jeanne Moreau, and Suzanne Flon.

Directed by John Frankenheimer. **B&W. Not rated. Running time** 133 minutes.

This is a much better picture about the efforts to save the precious works of art. That this film was billed as *John Frankenheimer's The Train* with his name above the title shows



The Train, directed by John Frankenheimer, stars Burt Lancaster and Jeanne Moreau.
© United Artists/Photofest.

how long a way he came from his high school days at La Salle Military Academy. He had already directed such films as *The Birdman of Alcatraz*, *The Manchurian Candidate*, and *Seven Days in May*. It was another example of his having taken over a troubled movie after the original director was fired, and making it a success. The film opens with a tribute to the French railway men “whose magnificent spirit and courage inspired the story.”

It is August 2, 1944, day 1511 of Germany’s occupation of Paris, and the allies are on the outskirts of Paris. Colonel Von Waldheim (Paul Scofield), in charge of protecting the artwork at the Musée Jeu de Paume, arrives at the museum, which is guarded by Nazi soldiers. As he visits his favorite pictures, his reverie is interrupted by the curator Mlle. Villard (Suzanne Flon), who thanks him for saving the pictures. She assumes that because Paris has been declared an Open City, the Allies will not bomb it and that the art will soon be safely turned over to them. He tells her that he has no thought of doing that; in fact he orders the paintings to be crated and taken aboard a train bound for Germany. As the credits roll, we see separate crates for Gauguin, Renoir, Van Gogh, Manet, Degas, Miró, Picasso, Braque, Seurat, Cézanne, Matisse, Utrillo, Dufy, and Lautrec.

The colonel is angered when his train is commandeered to take armaments and troops back to Germany. He argues to the general in charge that the artwork is more precious than the troops, being worth millions of reichsmarks. Meanwhile, the curator asks the trainmaster Labiche (Burt Lancaster) to hold up the trains until the allies come, notwithstanding that any evidence of sabotage on the part of the railway men results in swift execution. In fact, the number of engineers is already low. Labiche says, “We are talking about the potential sacrifice of men for what? ‘La gloire de la France?’” Meanwhile, they are warned that Spitfires will strafe the railyards at 11 AM. The old engineer Papa Boule (Michel Simon) pulls out “his” train containing the art against orders to avoid its being hit. Having saved the paintings, he returns to the yard and sticks a franc

in the oil line to keep the train from going any further. Von Waldheim detects the old trick and has him shot on the spot. Labiche takes over and he and his two assistants orchestrate an ingenious plan to save the paintings.

It’s fun to watch Lancaster do all his stunts in the railyards and on the moving train. Before he became a movie star, he was a circus acrobat. If you get a chance check out *The Flame and the Arrow* (1950) and *The Crimson Pirate* (1952) to see him go full bore in his prime in two lighthearted actioners. Though *The Train* was made in 1964, Frankenheimer chose to film it in black and white—between the smoke, the oil, and the grime, it’s hard sometimes to make out what’s going on; apparently, the weather was terribly rainy during the shooting as well.

The film becomes a contest between Von Waldheim and Labiche. The colonel thinks they are going through Metz, an important switching nexus to Germany, whereas Labiche has orchestrated an elaborate ruse to bring the train back to Paris in hopes it has been liberated. Jeanne Moreau plays a small but excellent part as Christine, a widowed innkeeper who helps Labiche to pull off his scheme. Unfortunately, the liberation of Paris is delayed as a gesture to allow the French to lead the re-occupation in their march to the Arc de Triomphe. This “gesture” embitters Labiche because many Frenchmen trying to save France’s patrimony and held hostage by Von Waldheim could die as a result. If so, most of them will never have been apprised of the reasons for their being put in jeopardy.

I don’t want to give away any spoilers. Trust me, the film is worth seeing.

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