'Killing Them Softly' is not subtle, not for the faint of heart

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***Special to* The Wilson Post**

In rain-soaked New Orleans, Director **Andrew Dominik** uses the collapse of the local criminal economy as a blatant depiction of the recession in America and paints a grim, nihilistic view of the current American landscape and creates a film that will only improve with age.

“Killing Them Softly” tells of two criminal screw-ups, Frankie (**Scoot McNairy**) and Russel (**Ben Mendelsohn**
) are chosen by Johnny “Squirrel” Amato (
Vincent Curatola
) to steal money from a mob-run poker game. After the caper, the trio runs into trouble when the mob brings in Jackie (
Brad Pitt
) to clean up the mess.

From a startling opening set to then-Senator **Barack Obama** speaking about the 2008 election, the film uses its mob-poker game to parallel the economic ruin of New Orleans following Katrina and America in the grips of recession.

Dominik abandons all subtlety as politicians are everywhere, on radio, televisions and voice-overs. The images and constant reminders of economic conditions permeate virtually every scene.

When the poker game is hit, the mob roughs up the game's keeper Markie Trattman (**Ray Liotta**) and use him as an apparent scapegoat to return confidence in the criminal community. The references to economic confidence from speeches by then-President **George W. Bush** make it impossible to miss Dominik's message.

"Killing Them Softly" is a bleak image of America, where "corporate mentality" as one character puts it, rules everything. Even the film's ending points to the fact that "America is a business." It's rare a film comes out in the midst of the climate it speaks against or depicts so vividly.

When two tough guys rough up a mobster, the camera pans from the outside of a peaceful home, until the mobster is thrown out of the back door, while the sounds of chaos and violence are heard the whole time.

Russell and Frankie are poor and down-on-their luck, and it is obvious work is hard to come by, even for criminals. Jackie also raises a stink about his payment when he's told he gets "recession prices."

The film is unclean and brutal, from vivid sound effects and vicious images of violence and brutality, so it is definitely not for the faint of heart. There is comedy strewn throughout and **James Gandolfini's** performance as nostalgic, drunk hit man Mickey is great.

Pitt gives a cool and low-key performance, the lone figure in the world that seems to manipulate both sides of the populace, remain calm and work every situation to his advantage, while condemning the system of America and taking advantage of it at the same time.

Dominik doesn't bash one political party in particular with Pitt's character thumbing his nose at Obama's acceptance speech in 2008, and the placement of Bush's speeches also seem critical

of him as well. There is not so much a political message in “Killing Them Softly” as there is a view of America as every-man-for-himself.

Jackie says “In America, you’re on your own,” and calls America a “business.” No character in the film is necessarily memorable, and neither Liotta nor Gandolfini add to their legacies here. While Pitt is slick and “cool,” his performance doesn’t necessarily stand out, as his last trip with Dominik did as Jesse James in "The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford" (2007).

The film is an adaptation of **George V. Higgins’** novel “Cogan’s Trade” and Domink deserves a lot of credit for his screenplay. The dialogue snaps and exchanges between characters are funny, and natural, with almost every conversation having something real to say, down to Pitt’s final lines, which wrap everything up in a nutshell.

“Killing Them Softly” is unsurprisingly a movie for those who can handle the foul language, graphic violence and brutality of a good crime story. It is heavy handed, but Dominik’s lack of subtlety worked for me, I thoroughly enjoyed it.

“Killing Them Softly” is rated ‘R’ with a runtime of 1 hour, 37 minutes.

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