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## Goodfellas

**Martin Scorsese**

**USA 1990**

**146 minutes**

**Cast: Robert De Niro (James Conway), Ray Liotta (Henry Hill), Joe Pesci (Tommy De Vito), Lorraine Bracco (Karen Hill), Paul Sorvino (Paul Cicero), Frank Vincent (Billy Batts)**

**A brash, menacing hightail through the death of the mob ... Scorsese's 1990 masterpiece zips along with relish, and his acting A-team – De Niro, Pesci, Liotta – are on top form as this brilliant comic nightmare unfolds**

'Being a gangster was better than being president of the United States!' Is it less of a choice than ever? The rerelease of Martin Scorsese's brash and brilliant mob masterpiece from 1990 – about the rise and fall of Irish-Italian criminal Henry Hill, from the 60s to the 80s – is a reminder of what his very best work looks like, and you can feel again the stunning impact of his A-team: Robert De Niro as Jimmy "The Gent" Conway and the Oscar-winning Joe Pesci as his psychopathic buddy Tommy DeVito, with Paul Sorvino as the malevolent and slow-moving capo Paulie Cicero and the director's mother Catherine Scorsese superb in her cameo as Tommy's artistically inclined mom.

Ray Liotta gives a thrillingly livewire and career-defining performance as the wide-eyed aspirational tough guy Henry himself, whose gorgeous gravelly voice gives this film its sensational voiceover, along with Lorraine Bracco, imperious and charismatic as Henry's loyal, mistreated wife Karen, perhaps the one character who emerges from the story with something approaching dignity.

Since the movie's original release, Bracco and Michael Imperioli (the hapless Spider) went on to star in HBO's *The Sopranos*, which developed and amplified the movie's theme that being a gangster isn't as great as it used to be. The real Henry Hill died of a heart attack in 2012; Jimmy Conway succumbed to lung cancer in prison in 1996; Paul Vario, the model for Paulie, had died in prison in 1988; and Thomas DeSimone, the model for Pesci's unforgettably scary Tommy, vanished in 1979 and remains untraced for reasons that are obvious from the film.

*Goodfellas* barrels along with unstoppable storytelling relish, its jukebox slams of pop music repeatedly convulsing the movie with sugar-rush excitement amounting almost to hysteria. It's not a movie with a formal three-act structure, it just unloads radioactively horrible and fascinating anecdotes in irresistible succession, and you watch Liotta's Henry gradually deteriorating as he becomes his own loyalest customer in the cocaine business.

Scorsese shows how the mob ethic of never ratting on your friends is nonsense, as Henry sells them out to the FBI to save himself, and Jimmy paranoically whacks his comrades to pre-empt precisely this destiny. His strange and creepy offer of Dior dresses to Karen (as a possible ambush) is one of the film's most brilliant, ambiguous moments. All of the bonhomie

and good times are a lie: mobsters are friendliest just before the hit, or the FBI sellout. And the gangsters' sentimentality, fear and dysfunction are never more excruciating than when poor Tommy is taken into a basement for what he believes is his "made guy" ceremony. In a way, it is.

Watching *Goodfellas* again, what strikes me is the central question of its comedy, as Tommy famously asks: "Funny, how?" Like Tommy in that famous scene, the gangsters are always menacingly joking, kidding around, messing with you and – to use a key phrase – breaking your balls. Weirdly, the film it always reminds me of is Woody Allen's *Broadway Danny Rose*; veteran comic Henny Youngman puts in a cameo for *Goodfellas* with a routine that Danny would have recognised. The very words *goodfellas* or *wiseguys* are steeped in duplicitous, aggressive comedy; no one rules a situation like a guy who's just got a laugh at someone else's expense. *Goodfellas* is a compelling, black-comic nightmare.

Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*, Thursday 19 January 2017

Our next film: **A Man Called Ove**, Tuesday 7 November