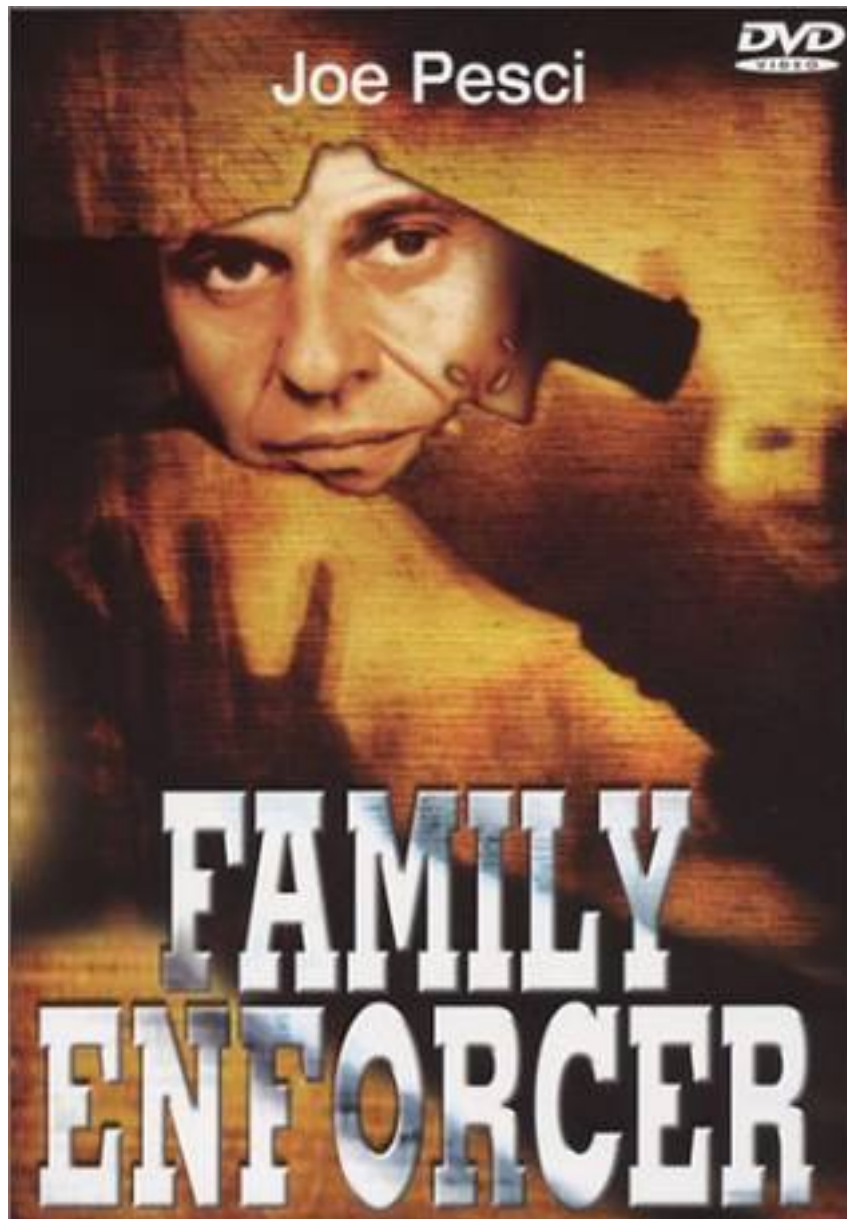


Mafia Cheese

George De Stefano (March 30, 2008)



Sometimes really bad gangster movies can make you appreciate the classics



Mafia movie classics like Coppola's "The Godfather," Scorsese's "Goodfellas," and David Chase's recently departed HBO series "The Sopranos" remind us that in the hands of gifted artists the gangster genre can produce works of great merit. We love the classics for their artistry, dramatic power, and social critique. But then there are the mob dramas that, in their sheer awfulness, make you appreciate Coppola, Scorsese, and Chase all the more.

I recently had the dubious pleasure of seeing two of the cheesiest gangster flicks ever, "Family Enforcer" and "Mob War."

The latter was made in 1989 by that celebrated Danish auteur J. Christian Ingvorsen, who, according to the Internet Movie Data Base, has "written, produced and directed eighteen feature films" since 1982. Most of these works, one suspects, went straight to video.

"Mob War" features raging bull Jake La Motta as Don Ricci, an old mobster threatened by the rise of a younger hood with better hair. (After Scorsese and De Niro apotheosized the ex-boxer, La Motta parlayed his new fame into a minor acting career.) The story is obviously inspired -- though inspiration hardly is a quality to be associated with this movie -- by the Paul Castellano-John Gotti rivalry. As all mob aficionados know, that clash ended with Castellano's whacking by Gotti's hoods outside a Manhattan steakhouse.

The Gotti figure, here called John Falcone, is played by a reputed actor named David Henry Keller, who apparently also is a physician: the IMDB notes that he's sometimes billed as "David Henry Keller, MD." I can only say, physician, heal thyself, and thy movie. As Falcone, a preening media whore of a mobster, Keller has the Gotti hairdo but he comes off more as a petulant yuppie executive than a ruthless gangster.

Falcone has gotten some bad press because of his dope dealing. To refurbish his image he hires a young PR hotshot named Todd Barrett (Johnny Stumper, a name that suggests a career in amputee porn might've been a better option). Barrett has the hopeless task of re-branding the drug lord as a philanthropist and all-around good guy. Falcone pays him well but keeps him in line with generous amounts of cocaine.

To make a ludicrous story short, Barrett eventually realizes that Falcone is a really bad guy and that



no amount of image-polishing will help. He's really sure of this when the mobster kidnaps his wife, played with impressive lack of affect by Adrianna Maxwell. With the blessing of Don Ricci, whom Falcone plans to whack, Barrett tracks down Falcone and, after a car chase that will make no one forget "The French Connection," kills him.

In the final scene, Barrett and Don Ricci meet up. The old gangster informs the PR whiz that he's now a mafioso. "Welcome to the family, kid," he chortles. No knife and pistol on the table, no burning picture of a saint, no blood oath. And who needs these mafia movie conventions when you've got the searing drama of Stumper's dyspeptic facial expressions and La Motta's orange hair.

"Family Enforcer," though a stinker, is more interesting than the ineffably bad "Mob War." Also known as "Death Collector," it was the only film directed by Ralph De Vito, who was shot to death in 1983. (No word whether the killer had seen "Family Enforcer.") Released in 1977, it is notable for two things: the appearance of Joe Pesci, in a secondary role as a mafia bagman, and the cavalcade of outré 70s hairdos and fashions.

Joseph Cortese, who still works today -- he most recently appeared in Abel Ferrara's 2007 film "GoGo Tales" -- plays Jerry Bolante, a

New Jersey tough with a hot temper and a fetching wedge-cut hairstyle. He wants money to buy a camper so he and his girlfriend can hit the open highway, leaving North Jersey and its corpse-filled meadowlands behind. (Spoiler alert: he never achieves his dream, and instead ends up as one of those interred stiff.) He gets work as a debt collector and stick-up man from Anthony Iadavia (Lou Criscuola), an opera-loving boss who for some reason has a soft spot for the sullen, unlikable Jerry.

One of the deadbeats who owes Anthony money is a crooked Jewish businessman named Bernie Feldshuh, played by -- are you ready? -- mafia movie stalwart Frank Vincent. Vincent, who, as disgruntled Jersey mob guy Phil Leotardo, would go on to have his skull popped in the final episode of "The Sopranos," doesn't aim for ethnic verisimilitude as Bernie. He never utters a single "Schmuck!" or "Oy vey is mir." But he does sport a fabulous jet-black poodle 'do and impressive 70s-style mustache.

Joe Pesci, touted on the DVD box as the star of "Family Enforcer," has more hair than he did in "Goodfellas" but a lot fewer scenes. In one of the better, if bizarre ones, he throws peanuts at a gay nightclub entertainer to make him stop warbling the songs of "Mr. Stephen Foster." He's also tight with a dimwitted hood named Serge, who's constantly thumbing through a copy of Playgirl magazine. Hmm. Maybe director DeVito should have made the homoerotic subtext the text. That might have at least clarified Anthony's affection for Jerry.



But Jerry's impulsivity and lack of respect infuriate his boss, with predictable results. When he goes to a junkyard to claim the longed-for caravan camper, he's surrounded by gunmen who have to be the louisiest shots in mobland, a real gang that couldn't shoot straight. They eventually finish off Jerry and bury his corpse in the swampy meadowlands. We weep not for him, but for the loss of his stylish pleather jacket, with its nipped waist and wide lapels. It deserved a better fate.

Martin Scorsese cast Joe Pesci and Frank Vincent in "Raging Bull" after seeing them in "Family Enforcer," according to the IMDB. And Ralph De Vito's sole production is an obvious Scorsese rip-off, but with none of Scorsese's cinematic brilliance, psychological acuity and social realism.

But as I mentioned, sometimes seeing a genre's duds helps one appreciate the good ones, how some directors can take the same thematic elements and tropes and make gold while others serve up only dross. Now that virtually any pop culture product, no matter how lowly, can generate dense academic analysis, some film student should explicate "Family Enforcer." He - and I'm sure it will be a he - can even use my title for his paper: "Wedge Cuts and Wide Lapels: Sartorial Signifiers in the Sub-Scorsesean Universe of 'Family Enforcer.'"

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