

Films by Richard Cotter

THE ASSASSINATION OF JESSE JAMES BY THE COWARD ROBERT FORD (MA) is both the long awaited new feature film by Andrew Dominik of CHOPPER fame and a return to grace and motion picture greatness of the Western genre. Like Chopper, Jesse James was a cold-blooded killer and psychopath, brutally bold; whose exploits manufactured a mythical mantle about the man. Like Ned Kelly in our popular culture, the killings and the callousness are conveniently confined to the dustbin of history in order for his adventures to attain the status of legend. But armed robbers and murderers like Chopper Reed and Ned Kelly and Jesse James do provide a fascination, and the cinema has fed this fascination since films first saw the light of dark.

It could be argued that the genres of crime and the Western were conjoined twins at the birth of cinema and that conjoining has reached another milestone in maturity in this movie. Brad Pitt notches up a career highlight in his depiction of Jesse James, a handsome but haunted individual, personable yet paranoid, respectable husband and father belying a brutish, bullying behaviour. And in a career cementing star turn, Casey Affleck's portrayal of betrayal in the persona of Robert Ford is awesomely affecting.

Dominik has fashioned an exquisitely articulate screenplay from Ron Hansen's novel. "You can hide things in vocabulary" states one of the James Gang, but the dialogue created by Dominik conceals nothing and in the mouths of this unilaterally talented cast reveals much and imparts a great deal of the pleasure in watching this picture. Roger Deakin's cinematography is nothing short of spectacular – the night time train robbery sequence sure to achieve iconic status and deservedly so - and should garner the lenser his sixth Oscar nomination and hopefully, his first win. Also with five previous Oscar nominations and destined to break the drought with this project, costume designer Patricia Norris's creations capture an authenticity that's palpable, with a special hat's off salutation to the magnificent millinery. There's a stupendous and understated score too by Nick Cave and Warren Ellis, with Cave cameoing as a troubadour slandering the assassin in song. Not a quick draw of a movie at 168 minutes but for all its length never less than fascinating to watch and listen to.

What is it with doctors and dogs in recent hi class hi gloss crime capers? In the opening sequence of the Jodie Foster starrer THE BRAVE ONE (MA) a doctor is brutally beaten and later a dog is instrumental to the denouement. In TELL NO ONE (MA) the beginning has a doctor brutally beaten and later a canine clinches the conclusion or at least provides a poochy alibi.

NE LE DIS A PERSONNE (TELL NO ONE) is a French adaptation of an American novel and one of the best, most intelligent thrillers to screen this year. Childhood sweethearts Alex and Margot are now recently married and spending an idyllic summer at the lake they spent their younger years together. The idyllic summer quickly pitches into nightmare winter when they are attacked – Alex comatose for weeks, Margot dead.

Fast-forward 8 years; paediatrician Alex is living his life through his work. On the anniversary of the assault he receives an anonymous email with an attachment video of what appears to be a woman bearing a remarkable resemblance to Margot. Simultaneously, after the discovery of human remains near the site of the assault, the police reopen the case, and Alex is Suspect One, a role that was assigned him originally, and for many in the Versailles Police Prefecture, sits well.

The spectre of suspicion is not the only shadow Alex has to deal with. A couple of henchies; the cool, urbane Valenti and the twisted-sister torturer Zach, are hot on his trail, not only terrorising him but his friends as well. Haunted by the past, hunted in the present, and hounded out of a future Alex is kidnapped, almost killed, framed, forsaken, and frantic to find the truth.

TELL NO ONE is a pretzel plot of a picture, layered like lasagne, so pay attention. Attentiveness is accomplished through the actors, assured accomplices to the killing of a couple of hours via strong characterisation. The line up of perps includes Francois Cluzet, Kristin Scott-Thomas, Nathalie Baye, Jean Rochefort and Marina Hands –the usual suspects in the presentation of class entertainment.