

TREASURES FROM THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

AN ONGOING SERIES OF CLASSIC AND CONTEMPORARY FILMS PRESENTED IN 35MM BY THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

FRIDAY, JANUARY 13
7 P.M. • HUMANITIES
QUADRANGLE
LECTURE HALL

THE UNTOUCHABLES

PRESENTED WITH SUPPORT FROM
PAUL L. JOSKOW '70 M.PHIL., '72 PH.D.



When former Prohibition agent Eliot Ness died at age 54 in 1957, he had largely been forgotten. Two years later he was a household name. Shortly before his death, Ness had written *The Untouchables*, a book about his battles with bootlegging czar Al Capone in the early 1930s. A television series expanding on the book debuted in 1959 and ran until 1963. It was still in reruns in 1984 when Ned Tanen became Paramount's president and began to realize a long-standing dream of dramatizing the story in "a big-scale movie about mythical American heroes."

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David Mamet was a natural to write the screenplay. Born and raised in Chicago, he was noted for plays set in the Windy City (including *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, *American Buffalo*, and *Glengarry Glen Ross*), had grown up hearing tales about Capone, and knew how tough guys talked. Mamet envisioned a variation on the Western: about "the old gunfighter and the young gunfighter; what happens when the young innocent, who's charged with defending the law but only understands that in an abstract way, meets an old, disenchanting veteran, the caretaker of the law, soured because of the corruption in the city." Director Brian De Palma, known mostly for often gory thrillers that paid homage to Hitchcock (*SISTERS*, *CARRIE*, *OBSESSION*, *DRESSED TO KILL*, *BODY DOUBLE*) and Antonioni and Coppola (*BLOW OUT*), had recently done two gangster films—a remake of Hawks's *SCARFACE* (the original version of which was based on Capone) and *WISE GUYS*—and he embraced the idea of a gangster/town-taming film, "different from anything I've done in the past, because it's a traditional Americana picture, like a John Ford picture." Ennio Morricone was perfect for the music: he had composed the scores for Leone's epic Western *ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE WEST* and Leone's epic gangster film *ONCE UPON A TIME IN AMERICA*.

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY **BRIAN DE PALMA**
SCREENPLAY BY **DAVID MAMET**, BASED ON
A BOOK BY **ELIOT NESS** AND **OSCAR FRALEY**
CINEMATOGRAPHY BY **STEPHEN H. BURUM**
PRODUCED BY **PARAMOUNT** (1987), 119 MINS.
STARRING **KEVIN COSTNER**, **SEAN CONNERY**,
ROBERT DE NIRO, **CHARLES MARTIN SMITH**,
ANDY GARCIA, AND **PATRICIA CLARKSON**

The young gunfighter is Kevin Costner, who had first achieved fame two years earlier for the Western *SILVERADO*. *THE UNTOUCHABLES* established him as an archetypal American hero, reinforced by *FIELD OF DREAMS*, *DANCES WITH WOLVES*, *JFK*, and (town tamer) *WYATT EARP*. Sean Connery won his only Oscar as the old gunfighter: an Irish American cop who teaches Ness "The Chicago Way." Even though the actor almost never loses his Scottish accent, it's ok because...it's Sean Connery, and he is the heart of the film. Robert De Niro's career had begun with De Palma in 1968-1970 with three Godard-influenced indies (*GREETINGS*, *THE WEDDING PARTY*, *HI MOM!*). To immerse himself in Capone, De Niro read books, viewed footage, gained 30 pounds, and shaved back his hairline. De Niro has a lot of fun chewing the scenery, which is lavish, as befits the flamboyant mobster: Production Designer Patrizia von Brandenstein's sets for Capone emulate Louis XIV's court (in the opening shot, with Capone on a barber chair throne, the Sun King is suggested by the sunburst motif in the inlaid floor) and King Arthur's roundtable (a baseball bat replacing Excalibur).

Chicago locations evoking the 1930s include the LaSalle Street Canyon (also featured in *FERRIS BUELLER'S DAY OFF* and *THE DARK KNIGHT*); the elegant lobby of Louis Sullivan's Auditorium Building, which stands in for the lobby of Capone's hotel; the Frank Lloyd Wright-re-modeled Rookery Building for Ness's headquarters; and Union Station, where De Palma stages an extravagant action scene/homage to Eisenstein's *BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN*. Great Falls, Montana, represents the Canadian border, where Ness and team, on horseback, and accompanied by Morricone's soaring "Victorious" theme, charge bootleggers—and the film momentarily becomes a full-blown Western.

Despite the Western trope of the hero having to adopt the outlaw's ways, this is fundamentally a good vs. evil conflict, shown most dramatically when Capone's brutal perversion of the great American pastime is followed by a tender scene of Ness watching his wife and daughter kneeling in prayer. The wife (Patricia Clarkson in her movie debut) is the quintessentially uncomplicated woman behind the man, but De Palma avoids the misogyny often attributed to him. He doesn't avoid his trademark violence, however. Be prepared for a bloody—and exhilarating—ride.

DID YOU KNOW: THE CONSUMMATE METHOD ACTOR, DE NIRO HAD ALL HIS CLOTHING MADE ACCORDING TO DESIGNS FROM CAPONE'S TAILORS AND INSISTED ON THE SAME BRAND OF SILK UNDERWEAR THAT CAPONE WORE. THE UNDERWEAR NEVER APPEARS IN THE FILM.

NEXT UP: THE SCENT OF GREEN PAPAYA (1993), TRAN ANH HUNG'S EQUISITELY PHOTOGRAPHED DRAMA ABOUT THE INTERACTIONS OF A SERVANT GIRL, A CONCERT PIANIST, AND A FAMILY IN GENTEEL DECLINE IN MIDCENTURY SAIGON. SCREENING ON 35MM, **THURSDAY, JANUARY 19 AT 7 P.M.**