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.”

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, disenchanted 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.

The young gunfighter is Kevin Costner, who had first achieved fame two years earlier for the Western THE WEST and Leone’s epic gangster film ONCE UPON A TIME IN AMERICA. The other main character, the old gunfighter, is played by Sean Connery. It’s a perfect casting of an Irish American cop who teaches Ness “The Chicago Way.”

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 didacticism of other gangster films by letting Capone speak for himself—most memorably, his monologue about the Inflexible Miss Capone, delivered in a scene that is one of the most moving in film history. The film is a masterpiece of its genre, a loving and uncompromising portrait of an all-American criminal icon.