

Legend and Room: Once again, celebrating the underworld—and a peculiar film about captives

Joanne Laurier
17 December 2015

Legend, written and directed by Brian Helgeland; Room, directed by Lenny Abrahamson, screenplay by Emma Donoghue, based on her novel

Legend

Written and directed by Brian Helgeland, *Legend* is a crime film that fictionalizes the story of the Kray twins, Reggie and Ronnie, London's most notorious gangsters in the 1960s.

Born in 1933 in the city's poor, tough East End, the Krays held sway over large parts of London's crime world through the most brutal means. The Helgeland movie is based on the book, *The Profession of Violence: The Rise and Fall of the Kray Twins*, by John Pearson. Ronnie and Reggie Kray are played by Tom Hardy.

As the film opens, Reggie has pulled strings to have Ronnie released from a psychiatric prison where he has been locked up for pathological violence. Ronnie, a homosexual, displays a burning need to dominate by naked, sadistic force. Reggie is slightly more sophisticated. The brothers begin to consolidate their power by dispatching the ruthless South London gangster Charlie Richardson (Paul Bettany), and proceed to initiate a relationship with the American Mafia who hope to turn London into another Las Vegas.

Trying to cover their East End roots with a layer of respectability, the twins wrest control of a posh local nightclub. In the meantime, Reggie falls head over heels for East Ender Francis (Emily Browning), the sister of one of his cohorts. She eventually marries him and tries to mend his evil ways with disastrous consequences.

The Krays leave mangled or dead bodies in their wake, and their empire is besieged by a relentless police inspector (Christopher Eccleston) and weakened by Ronnie's

paranoid psychopathy. While Reggie is doing time in prison, Ronnie tries to murder the Krays' financial advisor, Leslie Payne (David Thewlis), and engineers a sex scandal involving peer Lord Boothby.

The movie's closing titles reveal that Reggie Kray was convicted of murder in 1969 and sentenced to 30 years in prison. He was released in 2000 on compassionate grounds shortly before he died of cancer. Ronnie was found guilty of a separate killing in 1969 and died in a mental hospital in 1995, where he had been sent after being declared legally insane.

Legend is graced with slick production values and a tour-de-force performance by the charismatic Hardy. Unfortunately, the visual and artistic positives are largely in the service of shabby or shallow purposes. In a disturbing manner, the vicious, repugnant Krays are quasi-celebrated.

Opportunities are wasted. The movie treats events in a largely ahistorical manner, with no serious attempt to portray the social misery that afflicted the area the brothers grew up in. *Legend* sweeps aside the actual drama of everyday life in favor of gory exotica. While Hollywood at one time specialized in the gangster film, the best were aware of the connection between gangsterism and capitalist business.

Unhappily, despite a few easy jibes at the upper classes, *Legend* dwells on what it considers the Krays' magnetism. Says Helgeland: "This is my story of the Krays. A stunning time and place are long gone and so are its doppelgangers, the Krays; all of it has slipped into the alchemy of legend. I get to be their film biographer." In an interview, the filmmaker quips that "they were glamorous guys ... Gangsters are glamorous on some level. I didn't invent the glamour that goes with them." Glamorous to whom? These were thugs who preyed on their working class and small business victims.

The director, who has written screenplays for such noxious, misanthropic works as *L.A. Confidential* and *Mystic River*, further notes, "I was always trying to be ground level

with them. Never looking down and never looking up. You have to be on the side of your protagonists.” Again, says who? According to this line of reasoning, a filmmaker is not allowed to maintain a critical distance from his characters. This would rule out many of the greatest films of social commentary ever made, including Jean Renoir’s *The Rules of the Game*, Orson Welles’s *Citizen Kane* and, of course, Charlie Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator*! Unfortunately, this is Helgeland simply and lazily giving himself a blank check.

In fact, in *Legend*, the filmmaker demonstrates an unhealthy fascination with his creations. To a certain type of petty-bourgeois artist, gangsters are alluring rogues unconstrained by societal rules, who live in conditions of genuine “freedom,” which the artist can only dream about. It is a fantasy, and a badly misplaced one.

Moreover, one cannot help but observe the ongoing fascination with torture and sadistic violence in American films. At some level or another, US imperialism’s endless wars are seeping into works like *Legend*. The largely unconscious and socially oblivious artist, especially susceptible to giving in without critique or protest to the dominant political and social landscape, acts as a transmission belt. Thus, Helgeland goes to considerable effort for no compelling reason to resurrect a pair of psychopaths and parasites.

Room

Set in the US, Irish filmmaker Lenny Abrahamson’s *Room*, adapted from Emma Donoghue’s 2010 novel of the same title, is an odd movie about a young mother and her five-year-old son, the product of rape by the woman’s captor, imprisoned in a garden shed.

The movie’s first portion takes place in the confines of a tiny structure where Ma, or Joy Newsome (Brie Larson), and son Jack (Jacob Tremblay) live in squalor. Ma has shielded Jack from the awful truth, hiding him in a closet each time “Old Nick” (Sean Bridgers) brings them food and has his way with her. Jack has never been outside of nor known anything but ‘Room.’ His major interactions with the world occur through a small, static-generating television set, the books his mother reads to him and the games they play together.

Shortly after Jack’s fifth birthday, Joy tells him about her abduction by Old Nick seven years earlier, when she was 17 years old. Feeling he is old enough to participate in her escape plan, Joy coaches Jack—and the plan succeeds.

By now, Joy’s parents are divorced, and Ma and son go to

live with her mother, Nancy (Joan Allen), and the latter’s boyfriend, Leo (Tom McCamus). Joy’s father, Robert (William H. Macy), is an alcoholic sickened by the sight of his young grandson. Adjusting to a normal life is not the fairy tale Joy imagined it would be. But her horrific ordeal has earned her a break, and she and Jack get one.

Room has moving moments, despite a narrative that depicts an exceedingly unusual set of circumstances. Larson and Tremblay are garnering much deserved acclaim for their intense performances.

But while watching the film, one wonders precisely what Abrahamson is driving at. The immediate experience is one that .000001 percent or less of the population goes through. Are the filmmakers equating the hemmed-in, claustrophobic existence in the shed with the suburban life we see later on? Or are they arguing that in a “consumerist” society, people can and should get by with less? Is there even a benefit to being shielded from a terrifying external world? (In one scene in the shed, Joy kills a mouse, fearing that it will bring in germs from the outside. In another, Old Nick tells Joy how lucky she is not to have to work or pay bills.)

In one telling sequence, a talk show host interviews Joy in the pleasant confines of Nancy’s home. The woman is intrusive and bullying, peculiarly echoing the abuse Joy suffered in the shed. Again, what’s the point here?

One senses that something troubling and frightened about modern social life is being advanced in the film as a whole, but *Room* is too vague and noncommittal—albeit with some intriguing touches—about its aims to do much more than cash in on its idiosyncrasies as an abduction melodrama-thriller.



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