



57 KILL THE IRISHMAN (2011-R)

STARS: RAY STEVENSON, VAL KILMER, CHRISTOPHER WALKEN, VINCENT D'ONOFRIO
DIRECTOR: JONATHAN HENSLEIGH

Chances are you've never heard of the Cleveland Mob Wars. They began with the death of Mafia boss John Scalish in 1976, leaving control of the city's criminal enterprises and corrupt labor unions up for grabs.

Soon enough, the power struggle began. By the end of the year, 36 bombs had exploded around northeast Ohio and more than a dozen men were killed. The Cleveland wars sparked a chain reaction that shook the underworld structure in Milwaukee, Kansas City and other organized crime outposts. It led to acting Los Angeles boss Jimmy "the Weasel" Fratianno—who knew the inner workings of La Cosa Nostra across the country—flipping to become one of the government's most-important witnesses against the mob.

A central figure in that combat was Danny

Greene, known to all as "The Irishman." All these years later, Greene has become a legend to certain constituencies, a charismatic mythical figure.

Greene's story is told in the excellent 2011 biopic, *Kill the Irishman*, which covers his rise from lugging boxes as a stevedore to running a corrupt union to working as a mob enforcer to standing up to the new Mafia boss—Scalish's replacement—looking to grab a percentage of Greene's operation. There's a lot packed into two hours.

Along the way, *Kill the Irishman* borrows from some of the best gangster movies ever made. The opening shot—a flash forward to Greene surviving a car bombing that actually occurs later in the story—is a direct nod to the attempt on Ace Rothstein's life at the start of *Casino*. The scenes

where beleaguered longshoremen try to rise against corruption in their union will take you back to *On the Waterfront*. And Greene's turn as an FBI informer who uses that status to enhance his criminal power will certainly remind you of Frank Costello in *The Departed*.

So you've seen these plotlines before. But they don't just feel like copies of the originals, in large part because the movie stays true to Greene's real story.

The movie is based on the book *To Kill the Irishman: The War that Crippled the Mafia* by Rick Porrello, a suburban Cleveland police chief and author of three books on the mob. The script takes very few liberties with Porrello's book, which traces Greene's life from his impoverished youth to his exalted status as "the Robin Hood of Collingswood."

Lead actor Ray Stevenson, a native of Northern Ireland best known for his role as Titus Pullo in the HBO series *Rome*, plays Danny Greene as a complex figure—both a thug and a visionary. He goes on TV to recklessly challenge his enemies to kill him, but at the same time worries about cholesterol in his diet. He's the high school dropout who reads hardbound books, the cold-blooded murderer who celebrates Thanksgiving by handing out free turkeys to cops and neighbors. And in an industry that values silence, he's the chattiest guy on the block.

Kill the Irishman is helped by an outstanding cast. Christopher Walken, who is all over this book's Top 100, is his usual kooky-scary self as Jewish mobster Shondor Birns. At first, Birns serves as Greene's sponsor and mentor. But after a three-way money dispute among Birns, Greene and New York's Gambino Family, Birns puts out a contract on his former protégé's life. It is Birns, however, who gets blown to bits by a car bomb.

Vincent D'Onofrio (*Law and Order: Criminal Intent*) is more understated than usual as John Nardi, the labor racketeer trying to claim power after Scalish's death. Nardi first meets Greene when the young Irishman has the brass ones to stand up to him for a friend. The two eventually form a partnership, which lasts until Nardi, too, is the victim of a firebomb.

Val Kilmer (*Batman Forever*, *The Doors*) is also here as the good-guy cop who never solves a crime but is in the movie to serve as a counterbalance to all those bad guys. Kilmer—who has put on so much weight that he appears to have swallowed both The Riddler and Jim Morrison—gets to fire off one of *Kill the Irishman*'s best lines. Responding to a veiled threat by Greene, he says, "I will cut your heart out with a rusty butter knife and eat it while it's still beating."

You've probably figured out how it ends for Danny Greene (What's one more Cadillac up in flames?). Right before his grisly end, though, The Irishman is greeted by a pack of young boys on their bikes.

"My cousin says you've got balls like no one else," says one of the kids. "He wants to be just like you."

"Ah, you don't want to be like me," Greene tells the lad. Then, as Irish pipe organ music swells up, he removes a Celtic amulet from around his neck and slips it over the boy. For a guy professing not to be a hero, the movie sure allows him to go out like one.

🕒 HIT: Beyond the main characters, *Kill the Irishman*'s smaller roles are populated by a gangster movie all-star team. As Walken said in an on-set interview, "A lot of the actors in it are guys I know from New York, whom I worked with before. In that sense, it's a family picture."

We don't know about the family aspect. But we'll pay attention to any film boasting Paul Sorvino (*GoodFellas*), Vinny Vella (*Casino*), Vinnie Jones (*Snatch*), Mike Starr (*GoodFellas*), Steve Schirripa (*The Sopranos*) and Tony Lo Bianco (*The French Connection*).

❌ MISS: Greene's romance with flower-power nature girl Ellie doesn't ring true. What's the innocent veggie vendor doing with the hardened mobster? How is she so oblivious to his well-publicized criminal activities? Why is she unconcerned with the multiple attempts on his life? None of this is ever explained. We couldn't figure out any purpose for this subplot other than the opportunity to show actress Laura Ramsey's breasts.

✂️ WHAT THEY WROTE AT THE TIME: "While *Kill the Irishman* isn't a great movie, it's a juicy one, full of action, big dramatic moments and humor. . . . Stevenson is such a free-swinging force of nature that he pulls you into the story, making it an enjoyably involving tall tale that has the advantage of being improbably true."—Marshall Fine, *Huffington Post*

✓ REALITY CHECK: *Kill the Irishman* features more than a half-dozen scenes of car bombings. And yet victims continue climbing into their Caddies, which keep exploding. We were waiting for someone to smarten up and take public transportation.

👁️ REPEATED WATCHING QUOTIENT: Definitely worth multiple viewings. There are great actors here working with a well-crafted script. We watched *Kill the Irishman* three consecutive days and kept picking up new details.

📺 PIVOTAL SCENE: Through his connections as an FBI informant, Greene learns that a close friend, Art Sneiderger, has been blabbing about him to the cops. Greene has boasted that he regards his crew members as brothers. Now he must decide what to do.

"Maybe we could let him go, Danny," pleads another gang member. "I've known him all my life."

But Greene knows better. He sets up an operation where Sneiderger—unaware he's been found out—is told to plant a bomb under the car of a gang enemy. As Sneiderger backs under the automobile in the dark, Greene and the gang watch from a block away. Just as Sneiderger affixes the bomb, Greene flicks a switch, exploding both the rat and the car of his enemy.

Murdering his friend is a hard pill to swallow. But Greene now knows he can trust no one. The lesson comes in handy as things move along.

➔ DON'T FAIL TO NOTICE: *Kill the Irishman* is interspersed with actual television news footage from the 1970s. You'll see Brian Ross, who later became chief investigative reporter at ABC News, as a young local correspondent covering

Cleveland's mob wars. And, at the end, you'll see the real Danny Greene falsely predicting that "the luck of the Irish" would continue to keep him alive.

🔪 VIOLENCE LEVEL: High. In an early scene, a teen gets pierced through the hand with a No. 2 pencil. Later, a helpless parking valet—his body bound with duct tape and tossed in a car trunk—gets repeatedly stabbed as a show of loyalty. Those are just two of the highlights.

👊 BET YOU DIDN'T KNOW: The real-life fallout from Greene's assassination led to an unsuccessful mob murder plot against Cleveland Mayor Dennis Kucinich, as well as bribery charges against nearby Sheriff James Traficant (who was acquitted). Both went on to become U.S. Congressmen. In 2002, Traficant was convicted, in a separate case, of bribery, racketeering and tax evasion. He served seven years in federal prison.

🗨️ BEST LINE: New boss Jack Licavoli (Tony Lo Bianco) informs Greene that the mob wants a 30 percent take of his action.

"Do you understand?" Licavoli asks.

Greene nods. Then he offers his own spin on Licavoli's business plan: "Let's see. A gang of hairy, greasy wops who came into existence when a Greek fucked a goat want to extort hard-earned money from a band of noble Irish stock. How's that?"

Needless to say, his interpretation of things does not go over well.

👤 "I KNOW THAT GUY": Bob Gunton, who plays the corrupt and authoritarian president of the longshoremen's local, is best recognized for playing the corrupt and authoritarian Warden Norton in *The Shawshank Redemption*. He also was a regular for three seasons on the TV series *24*. As a young man, Gunton won a Bronze Star for valor for his service in the U.S. Army in Vietnam.

👁️ BODY COUNT: Thirteen, plus a whole lot more unseen carnage in all those bombed-out cars.