

Peek into Tony Soprano's formative years in 'The Many Saints of Newark'

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
Friday, 01 October 2021 04:58



Rating: ««

out of «««««

Running Time: 120 minutes

This will be playing in theaters and streaming on HBO Max, Oct. 1.

The HBO series, “The Sopranos,” premiered just over 20 years ago and became a phenomenon during its six-season run. Unfortunately, this reviewer didn’t have the pay-cable service and completely missed it as a result. In the years since, many who enjoyed the show have continued asking questions about the show and its colorful characters. As a newbie to the material, I would guess that “The Many Saints of Newark” isn’t interested in answering any of these inquiries.

That may be disappointing to some, but at least the film provides a few memorable moments and adds more background to the central criminal enterprise.

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The story's early focus is on Richard 'Dickie' Moltisanti (Alessandro Nivola) and his strained relationship with father and mobster, Aldo 'Hollywood Dick' Moltisanti (Ray Liotta). On the cusp of the 1967 Newark riots, viewers are also introduced to Harold McBrayer (Leslie Odom Jr.), an African-American member of the outfit's dealings. He must contend with racism from all sides, but still hopes to advance up the criminal ranks. After violent acts are committed during the upheaval, the story jumps forward into the next decade.

Richard Moltisanti and Harold McBrayer continue in their pursuits, making strides and eventually developing an adversarial relationship. The story also introduces Richard's admiring nephew, a teenage Tony Soprano (Michael Gandolfini), detailing the young man's struggle to find focus and inspiration in life.

For those excited about seeing a younger version of the lead character from the series, you will have to wait some time to reach this subplot. A good chunk of the story is set against the backdrop of the riots and the injustices committed by the police, as well as the inner turmoil between Moltisanti family members. McBrayer is solid as a put-upon underling dealing with prejudice and trying to succeed in spite of his mistreatment. Richard Moltisanti also has some excellent moments, particularly when visiting a family relation in prison.

These bits end up acting as confessions and darkly humorous therapy sessions, as the man attempts to rationalize his vicious acts and figure out his next move. And when he does appear, Michael Gandolfini is a natural as Tony. He's a likable kid, possessing a believable rebellious streak and reacting with appropriate curiosity about the unique figures around him.

It is unfortunate that the movie isn't quite sure who its main character is and jumps between characters so often. There are several plot threads featured and the transitions are, at times, awkward. Admittedly, all of the stories ultimately intersect (at least to some degree), but they don't coalesce or fit quite as snugly as one might expect. The film's big reveal appears to be what ultimately happened to Richard and who was responsible, although the secrets detailed won't result in major shock or surprise.

And of course, there are likely scenes with subtle references to the show, but those were lost on this viewer.

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Despite the story meandering between characters and feeling unfocused, one can't complain about the writing. When these figures speak to one another and bicker about personal issues, it is fascinating and enjoyable to watch. There are some fantastic and relatable interactions between Tony Soprano and his relentlessly negative mother Livia (Vera Farmiga) that deliver plenty of chuckles. Even some of the gruesome moments offer a pinch of grim humor, including a bit in which one character's toupee flips comically off his head while committing murder.

"The Many Saints of Newark," is an offshoot that is oddly stitched together and may not prove to be an indispensable addition to the show. Still, individual scenes do make an impression and those who watch it with expectations in check will enjoy some witty dialogue and engaging performances. It likely doesn't match the heights of the original series, but the film is intriguing enough to inspire this writer to finally go back, watch the show and see what the fuss was all about.

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