

Gazz from the online magazine filmrotation pays tribute to Sean Penn with a look back at STATE OF GRACE and COLORS

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During the midst of my annual Oscars viewing/drinking session, me and my friends – whilst in drunken recovery from the Will Ferrell/Jack Black moment (why the hell haven't these guys been signed up for their own movie?!?) – found ourselves drunkenly rising to our feet come Best Actor time and joining the star-studded audience in their standing ovation of Sean Penn.

Quibbles aside... And in our little social circle the quibbles were many and plentiful; was Penn's **Mystic River** performance really better than Bill Murray's in **Lost in Translation** (to me yes, to my friends a collective no)? In the year when fantasy was finally getting recognised by the Academy, should they have done the same regarding comedy and given it to Johnny 'Jack Sparrow' Depp? Does anyone actually rate Jude Law? When did Nicole Kidman get so ugly? Sean Connery puts that accent on doesn't he? Does anyone know one Scotsman who remotely sounds similar to him?

Anyway, putting those quibbles down and out of sight for a second, what no one could contest was that if **Lord of the Rings: Return of the King** was getting awarded as much for itself as it was for the ignored **Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring** and **Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers**, then Penn was getting awarded his place in the Oscar Annals as much for **21 Grams** and consistently superb and consistently ignored past achievements too.

Whilst De Niro has decided to move into the land of grab-the-paycheque-and-run-before-they-realise-he-hasn't-given-any-real-effort-since-**Casino**, and Pacino is fluctuating between nigh-on-unreleasable crap (**Simone** anyone?) and disgustingly embarrassing cameos (...cough... cough **Gigli!**), it would seem that Penn is still the only consistently talented mainstream actor out there effortlessly living up to the 'greatest of his generation' label. Yes, we will ignore **I am Sam** and **Hurly Burly**, if you please!

Watching **State of Grace** and **Colors** (two of my top five Penn movies, the others being **Fast Times at Ridgemount High**, **Carlito's Way** [in which Pacino is positively acted off the screen in my opinion] and his fantastic turn in **The Thin Red Line**), you can see an actor at the top of his game whilst also in that stereotypical but all important awkward phase of his career – **State of Grace** followed the flop of **We're No Angels** and kudos for his fantastic performance in **Casualties of War** being stolen by none other than Michael J. Fox (who, by the by, I thought wasn't very good in that movie at all). And **Colors** was a desperate but worthy attempt to exorcise the demons of **Shanghai Surprise**.

We'll not even get into Penn's trio of turns behind the camera – **The Indian Runner**, **The Crossing Guard** and, another of my favourites, **The Pledge** – whereby he proves himself to be as solid and talented a director as he is an actor.

**State of Grace** (bizarrely co-titled *The Irish Mob in New York* here in the UK for some reason) had the sour misfortune of being released in the year 1990, on the coat tails of **Goodfellas** and **Millers Crossing**. If two competing volcano/meteor/ant/fish/Alexander movies were too much for an audience to cope with then the poor reception of **State of Grace** would dictate that too much 'mob' is a bad thing too. Critically, **State** was a success. Commercially, it was a failure. However, time has been kind to the movie and a lot of film buffs are laying their hands upon it and championing it as the great little crime flick that it truly is. Hopefully in the wake of Penn's Oscar success, many more will start pouring over his back catalogue too.

**State of Grace** is all about Terry Noonan (played by Penn) who abandoned his old Irish-American neighbourhood, and his role as foot soldier to the Flannery crime family, many years ago. Returning to the 'hood to "catch up", his childhood friendship to local psycho hothead Jackie Flannery (a fantastic off-the-chart performance by Gary Oldman) kicks back up again. As a result, Noonan finds himself within the bosom of the Flannery clan again. Which isn't necessarily a bad thing seeing as Noonan is in fact an undercover cop working to infiltrate the Flannery family and bring them down. [Don't worry I'm not spoiling any major plot point seeing as the [Imdb.com](http://Imdb.com) and the back of the DVD box proudly give this fact away!]

Whilst Jackie Flannery is holding the position of 'The Big Number Two', his calmer-but-all-the-more-ruthless older brother Frankie (Ed Harris) is in control. Their ways of dealing with things conflict, with Noonan continually trapped in the middle. When Jackie and Noonan's childhood friend and fellow gang member Stevie (played by a wonderfully understated John C. Reilly) is murdered and Jackie suspects the rival Italian family [that his older brother is trying to broker a deal with] as being responsible, he decides to exact revenge and start an all out war. What he doesn't realise is that it is actually Frankie who is responsible.

And as the stakes get even higher, and Noonan does everything to keep his cover tight, he lays eyes on his childhood flame and sister to the Flannery boys (Robin Wright who went on to marry Penn after meeting on this picture) and begins a torrid romance again. Things come to a head on St Patrick's Day, in a little Irish Bar away from the parade, when Noonan puts his job aside to go and exact revenge on Frankie for what is clearly one 'inside murder' too many.

This climactic shoot-out that concludes the film is expertly done. There's no over-exaggerated John Woo histrionics here. With Ennio Morricone's haunting score now switched off, it's the thumpingly realistic sound of being caught in the crossfire that we, the audience have to endure. **Copland** played 'homage' (i.e. stole it wholesale) in its finale, but its done much better here.

Sticking with the gritty street realism it has went to great lengths to present throughout its first and second acts, **State of Grace** doesn't sell out with a goodie versus baddie confrontation Hollywood style. Frankie and Noonan don't lock fists in a fight to the death with Noonan getting pulverised and then coming back at the last second. No, this is the sort of altercation that is almost painful to watch because of its realism – bullets are ear-bashingly-loud, sometimes they miss, sometimes they hit, and sometimes they hit the wrong people in the wrong places. Good guys don't walk away unscathed simply because they are the good guys. If this were a movie with less talented actors in it, then this barroom climax would quite easily be **State of Grace's** highlight.

However, in a movie where you have Sean Penn and Gary Oldman at the top of their game, continuously trying to leave the other floundering, then Phil Joanou's attempts at shooting action or stylistic attempts at capturing Hell's Kitchen are unfortunately going to go unnoticed. Penn and Oldman are backed up by a brilliant Ed Harris (who I thought was as good as he was ever going to get in this movie until I saw **Buffalo Soldiers** recently) and a supporting cast that includes John C. Reilly and John Turturro, not to mention Robin Wright (or Wright Penn if you want to be pedantic) who more than holds her own in one of the only female roles in the movie.

**State of Grace** is a forgotten gem of a movie in the (now over-crowded) crime genre. If you've seen and liked **Goodfellas** and **Millers Crossing**, yet you haven't seen this then I'm ashamed to say we here at Filmrot have no choice but to ask you to leave and go and talk to Harry Knowles about which movie company he's whoring himself to this week. Alternatively, now that it is available as part of the wonderfully cheap and cheerful MGM Budget Range (both in the US and the UK), there's really not an excuse in the world why you shouldn't get a copy. I mean come on, it's only a couple of quid and they throw in 5.1 sound as well.

Anyway, moving on... **Colors** was a movie whose potential the studio who owned the script didn't even recognise. They had a hard-edged, grimy portrayal of the effect early gang culture had upon Los Angeles and the trouble the local LAPD C.R.A.S.H unit had in fighting it.

What they wanted was, post-**Lethal Weapon**, less controversial coverage of the gangs and more interaction between the lead cops. But not just any interaction – comedy interaction! Legend has it that writer Michael Schiffer took many a meeting where they tried to turn the script from a drama into a comedy-drama, and then an action-comedy (something similar to what I am experiencing myself in my own life at the moment!) and so on and so forth... desperate to capture the enormous boom in the buddy-buddy genre that was taking place at that very time.

In stepped Dennis Hopper. Initially bought in at a very early stage to be considered for the role of Bob Hodges, Hopper “got” what the script was about, got what needed to be done and started talking himself up for the directors job that lay vacant. He pitched it as a movie that is trying to capture an indelible part of the history of Los Angeles. In many interviews at the time and since, Hopper has openly talked about how – had he initiated the project himself – it would have been a much more open study of the Bloods and the Crips than what the finished project is. He has openly discussed how he had always hoped the Hodges and McGavin characters would become “subplots” to his main plot: the study of the gang culture. Studio pressure would not allow this so Hopper decided to achieve what he wanted to say about gang culture in LA with the little screen time he was allowed through the script. The results are shocking, controversial, at times irresponsible... basically everything it should be if telling this story properly!

What the studios had was a socio-dramatic piece that would go on to attract two of Hollywood’s greatest generational actors. What they wanted was something more like **Lethal Weapon** but that would attract more talent than Steve McQueen’s son (I shit you not) who was floating around the project, after the part of McGavin and desperate to prove he was more than just a cameo appearance in **The Karate Kid**. Hopper roped in Robert Duvall and Sean Penn. The rest is history.

Duvall plays Bob Hodges, a uniformed police officer who’s worked his whole career on the streets. He’s seen the continuing changes take place within L.A; he’s adapted to all of them and learned a lot of experience as a result. Penn is Danny McGavin, a brash uncompromising younger officer who knows nothing that can be decreed valuable on the mean streets.

The two are forced to work together as members of the LAPD's renowned C.R.A.S.H anti-gang unit, even though each is diametrically opposed to working alongside the other.

Their first assignment together is to investigate a gang murder but as they go about it, they realise that they are walking into the middle of a turf war. Soon it becomes apparent that after repeated ambush and double-cross from both sides, McGavin and Hodge's uniform counts for absolutely nothing in terms of survival on the street, it's the colour you choose to wear and the gang you decide to stand with.

Performance wise, **Colors** is very different to **State of Grace**. Whilst the latter sees Penn and Oldman trying to one inch each other in terms of acting ever step of the way (resulting in scene after scene of solid dramatics, never once sliding into pantomime territory), **Colors** sees two actors perfectly secure in the presence of each other's talents. Instead of one-stepping each other, they compliment each other. There's a crashing sense of realism to both the characters of Duvall's Hodges and Penn's McGavin. It's testament to both their brilliant performances that towards the tragic conclusion, Penn and Duvall have slipped from our thoughts all together and we truly regard them as Hodges and McGavin.

Directing wise Hopper does a sterling job. I've never been a fan of his work as a director really (yes... that includes **Easy Rider**) but here he is surprisingly good. The action is framed with a sense of grittiness so that the shootouts and car chases side step the Hollywood stereotype. His only real misfire is the handling of Penn's romantic subplot involving gang-girl Maria Conchita Alonso. It doesn't ring true, it slows the film down and it's shot like only a true, soft 80s sex scene could be. :)

There has always been solid criticism of Hopper (still to this day in some circles) for his work on this movie. They say that he makes no attempt to provide solutions but merely presents the disturbing reality of the situation as a backdrop for a "good old fashioned Hollywood narrative". Personally, I think to have presented this film with conclusive solutions would have undermined everything that went before it and destroyed the very notion of **Colors** itself.

To have shown a 'happy' ending whereby the C.R.A.S.H unit finally rundown the gangs and bring peace to LA would have been so ridiculously trite that it would have been laughed off the screen. On the opposite end, to have shown a 'sad' ending (well... lets just say "sadder" than the all too tragic one up that actually does end the film) whereby the gangs overthrow the police units and take not just control of the streets but the city too, would have been so callous it could not possibly have worked. The 80s were not a time when audiences were appreciating 'bleak cinema' – hell if John Carpenter's **Escape From New York** tanked for presented a "depressing future", then what would have happened to **Colors** when it depicts a future America run by the black street gangs and a police force that is powerless to deal with them?

**Colors** is a snapshot of that time, that place... the rising of the LA street gangs so the arguments that it hasn't aged well as a film don't really carry that much weight for me. Times have moved on, the gangs have evolved and police procedures have advanced greatly in sixteen years. **Colors** is an attempt – whether it is a successful one or not is down to the viewer themselves – to capture that moment back then.

**Colors**, like **State of Grace**, is available as part of the great little MGM budget range (they must own one of the greatest back catalogues ever!). Pick it up! In fact, word just reaches me that here in the UK the MGM range have an offer on at the moment whereby you can pick any two films from their back catalogue for only ten quid. So you could effectively own both of these forgotten gems for the price of two cinema tickets. Damn, MGM need to start paying me for being such a whore!

And because this is all about the re-appreciation of Mr Sean Penn, I leave you with a segment from Total Film's recent interview with Mr Penn himself:

**Q. Are you ready to blow kisses at the paparazzi yet?**

A. No, because they're the dung beetles of the world. They reek of piss and I'll never change my attitude towards them!

And they killed Princess Diana too and stopped her from making her acting debut in **The Bodyguard II: Royal Protection** according to Kevin Costner – and he wouldn't lie, he made **American Flyers** ;)