Express hits harder than a freight train

Midnight Express, a Columbia Pictures release, starring Billy Hayes, Rudi Quaid, John Hurt, and Irene Miracle, directed by Alan Parker, screens by Oliver Stone: new playing at the Sack Beacon Hill.

By Al Sanders

Following in the footsteps of many a director before him, director Alan Parker has taken an engaging real-life drama and has transformed it into only a shadow of the movie it could have been. As it is, Midnight Express is an excellent job of conveying the fear and terrors that accompany incarceration in foreign jails. Unfortunately, the overall pace is uneven, and the movie’s “climax” is so contrived and unbelievable that it nullifies the tension that was so painstakingly built up in the preceding segments.

Oliver Stone’s screenplay is based on the events that befell Billy Hayes after he was apprehended while trying, rather naively, to smuggle two kilos of hashish out of Turkey. With 53 days left of his original sentence, Hayes learned that his sentence had been upgraded to smuggling, his situation became worse and worse until at the darkest hour, Hayes suddenly kills the guard, sets off a total fiasco and finds himself free in a matter of minutes. The change is so abrupt that the audience is left unsatisfied. Such a finale challenges even the most vivid imagination to find it believable.

As it actually happened, Hayes escaped off an island by stealing a rowboat and making his way to Greece. This episode occupies a large portion of Hayes’ book. Realizing that the ordeal truly took place makes it even more thrilling.

The makers of the film version, not content with the material they had, decided to “improve” the story and failed miserably. Almost totally ignoring the escape sequence, the plot concentrates on the unbelievable conditions that Hayes must endure.

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Despite the emotional letdown at the end, Midnight Express includes some incredibly powerful scenes. In fact, when asked how close to reality the film was, Hayes said that he found it almost as close.

Five years of heavy emotional stresses are crammed into two hours of filming, resulting in scenes so graphic and intense as to make them sometimes difficult to watch.

Obviously Parker wanted to affect his audience, and that he does. Still, one must question the necessity of totally repulsing the viewers, as in the fight scene in which Billy Hayes, portraying Hayes, bites the tongue out of a hated prison squealer.

The characterization of the story are exceptional. If the film fails, one cannot place all the blame with the necessity of the cutting the film. Brad Davis, in his major screen role, is by far the most credible in the story. He has immersed himself totally in this role leaving the viewers with a lasting impression in the process.

Nevertheless, even Davis is overshadowed by the outstanding supporting performances given by Rudi Quaid and John Hurt. The performances of the two are so strong that they make even as badly behaved as Billy Hayes in that they are worn down and finally broken by the opposition, probably never to escape.

Midnight Express definitely succeeds in its goal of publicizing the shocking conditions prevalent in Turkish jails. It is so successful that the government of Turkey has vehemently protested showing of the film ever since its debut at the Cannes Film Festival. In addition, the movie rather self-servingly announces in the closing credits that negotiations between the US and Turkey for prisoner exchange began shortly after the Cannes opening, although how directly responsible Express was is questionable.

Midnight Express is our all that successful as a film. We can only wonder what a devastating experience it could have been had Parker and Stone not disregarded the decision to show what they thought was a good story instead of what really happened.