

The Chicago Way by Andy Horton

“When a man becomes pre-eminent, he is expected to have enthusiasms. What are mine?”

Movies. Film. Cinema. Every genre, every era. I grew up with films, learning their vocabulary, their grammar, their culture, like a bilingual child. My parents spoke cinema to each other and to us. Westerns, comedies, gangster movies – I watched them all. The grainy noir giving way to technicolour, each generation of filmmakers building on the lexicon of their predecessors. At some point I learned to recognise actors, first by face and then name, and know which qualities to expect from the characters they played. And then directors and composers, and - shamefully last of all – the writers and cinematographers.

I caught every classic or cult movie I could. I watched and rewatched. As I grew up, my passion for films never left me. And some became lifelong favourites.

To me as a student in the 1980s, spending every weekend catching every new and old movie I could, a new film by De Palma, written by Mamet and scored by Morricone, with Costner and Connery playing against De Niro was like a flame to a moth. I skipped an evening of my final exam revision to see it.

Its echoes of older directors thrilled me. It looked and sounded beautiful. Its story gripped. It may have been filmed in Chicago but it took place in the world of cinema where good men risked all to fight against evil, culminating in a guns-blazing psychomachia on the railway station steps.

And, like so many of the films my late father had brought into my life, it spoke of masculinity without toxicity. Friendship expressed through challenge and response, trust earned and expressed through gruff words: “you’re a good cop, Giuseppe.” Yes, *The Untouchables* was a favourite film from the first. Its scenes, its dialogue, etched in my memory.

“Who would claim to be that who was not?”

My partner, a cataloguer, was invited to an annual gathering of library luminaries. Plus their partners.... “How would you feel about a trip to Chicago?” she had asked. “Aren’t there some films you like set there?.” There were. Not least, *The Untouchables*. Even by the time she had finished speaking, I had my phone out searching for the filming locations. One I wanted to know about in particular. Was that station, with its steps, still there?

“Yeah, well you’re not from Chicago!”

By the time we departed, I had a Lonely Planet guidebook heavily annotated, tickets on my phone for a Chicago Cubs baseball game, and a list of addresses paired with the locations for which they doubled in *The Untouchables*.

Long haul flying and jet lag were new to me. I barely took in at first the enormity of a big American city in real life. It felt like another dimension, slightly dislocated, once-removed, dreamlike – like watching in-flight movies.

“But in the field, what? Part of a team...”

That first week, we were tourists together. In our new matching Cubs hats, we explored the city. She discovered boat tours, museums. I bought us passes for the trains running overhead. We saw the Field Museum’s dinosaurs. We fed stingrays at

the Shedd Aquarium. We went to the cinema. We feasted on local delicacies so rich, beefy and cheesy that eventually my stomach rebelled and I started seeking out green salads rather than burgers.

“If you walk through that door, there’s no turning back!”

As our second week began, I escorted my partner to the American Library Association HQ, then turned back up the road. I was on my own now, a conference widower. I had my guidebook and notes. I was on my way.

My first Untouchables location was Lafayette Bridge pedestrian walkway. The site of Ness and Malone’s first meeting, as the downcast righteous man meets “that one honest cop” who becomes his ally and mentor in a relationship based on their will to do right despite a culture of stifling corruption.

Burrow’s cinematography and Morricone’s wistful music make the starkly functional setting oddly beautiful in the Chicago evening. Mamet’s dialogue – at first abrasively confrontational from both men before reconciling in empathy and respect – is delivered by two fine character actors whose talent is often eclipsed in their casting as leading men. The dialogue crackles, harking back to an earlier era of Hollywood.

Malone accepts Ness as a Treasury man allowed to go armed. He has sized him up and this is no gangster. He follows up with unexpected compassion. “Rough day on the job? Well, you have just fulfilled the first rule of law enforcement – when your shift’s over, go home alive!” he tells the despairing Ness. I have said the line in rueful sympathy to a good few friends over the years. “The first rule of librarianship...” or accountancy, or transport planning or whatever. In its absurdity, it still touches the same chord as the original – you’ve had a tough day, I’ve had those too., Sometimes that’s all it’s possible to say, and all that’s needed.

The scene is set at night, with the bridge a softly blue-lit space cleared of litter by the film crew. I was approaching it in its grimy modern reality, on a bright morning with sunlight harshly reflecting up from the river. I could hear the traffic above, smell the petrol and engine oil, as I stepped onto the walkway.

At once, I was there. I walked from the same side Ness did. I imagined Malone walking from the other direction. I reached the middle, leaned against the rail like Costner did. Yes, I recited both men's dialogue. Yes, I took photographs. But mostly I stood in that space, a pilgrim at a holy site.

"Do you know what a blood oath is?"

My next site was actually holy ground. Our Lady of Sorrows National Basilica, to the west of the city. The location where Ness and Malone make a pact to "get Capone." I walked from the station past run-down streets, discount warehouses, to reach the grand old church. I walked up to the door, anticipating the lovely interior I knew from the film. "Come and join us for worship," the sign said.

The door was locked. The lights inside were unlit. I recalled the homeless people I had seen between the station and the basilica, and wondered if they were the reason the church had barred its doors outside service times.

There was nothing to be done. I took a few photos of the building, sat on a bench outside in place of a pew and recited more of the dialogue, then got back on a train and returned to the more salubrious North Side.

"He's in the car!"

I didn't visit every location alone. We saw the Chicago Theatre together, my partner and I. And she was as eager as I was to visit the Chicago Cultural Institute to see an exhibition of modern Native American art.

But I was also excitedly exclaiming: "this is where Capone stands at the opera!" and "they used this bit for the courthouse!."

She obligingly took photos of me aping De Niro as Capone playing to the press or Costner looking earnest as the pursuit of the murderous Nitti begins. I had already taken a shot of the roof, focusing on the exact corner from which Nitti is finally hurled. I followed this up with a photograph of the street below, where he lands.

Other location hunting took me to the Rookery building, the impressive frontage of the Untouchables' HQ. And the skyline from the poster, another sight which made my heart beat faster. I could fairly hear the triumphant Morricone score.

"Mister..."

I passed a now empty Wrigley Field where we had watched the Cubs play. Nearby was the junction where Capone's men blow up a restaurant for refusing to buy their liquor. I stood where the camera was positioned, el-track trains running above my head, and pointed my phone at the bar entrance, at the doorway where the little girl steps out holding what the language of film has telegraphed to the audience must be a bomb. The innocent calls out: "Mister! You forgot your..." And then the explosion. It is still brutal to watch. I found it hard even to snap the picture. Film can deliver subtlety, and it can, as here, present moral absolutes. That brief scene intercut with a smugly hypocritical Al Capone grandstanding to a fawning audience shows the evil that must be fought, sets out the moral landscape in which the battle is to unfold.

"Yeah, I got him!"

There are landscapes of literal battle in the film too. The bridge on which Mounties and Untouchables charge Capone's liquor convoy is real, though too far away for me to visit.

But that station? With those steps?

Still there. Chicago's Union Station, still a busy rail terminal.

I fancied a trip out of town. Milwaukee was doable, if I set off early. And going early would mean I was at those steps first thing in the morning, before they became crowded with travellers.

The original script had set the gun battle on a moving train, but things change in filmmaking and making a virtue of necessity De Palma reworked it as an homage to the Odessa Steps sequence in Eisenstein's Battleship Potemkin. But instead of a tragic massacre, this was a scene of suspense, cathartic action, and heroic camaraderie.

Once, in a high-stakes pub quiz (if there can be such a thing), I threw my pen across the table to a friend whose own had just run out and drew a spare one from my jacket pocket. We both grinned knowing that we had re-enacted Stone's diving entrance, throwing an unarmed Ness a revolver. It was one of those moments acknowledging the sometimes limited range of reference points that men share – sports, certain movies. Also how in the tough-guy world of the movies ordinary masculinities are writ large. A curt nod, a brief exchange of names may call to mind Yul Brynner meeting Steve McQueen in the Magnificent Seven, and we may recognise that echo. But that scene does no more than model a thousand such meetings that happen each day.

Many years before, I had been on a coach tour of Italy and saw from my road atlas that we were approaching Monte Cassino. I looked up and experienced viscerally what I already knew from reading – that hill commanded a view from which defenders could call down murderously accurate fire onto the attacking Allies. I understood in a way I had not before what a bloodbath my great-uncle Eric had marched into in 1943.

Union Station steps, as I walked through the doors at the top, gave me the same visceral understanding but of a fictional battleground. Someone dragged a wheeled suitcase down them, making the same bump-bump that the baby cart made in the film. I traversed them, flashing back to camera angles, actor positions. Here, Ness lets go of the baby cart to draw his shotgun. Here, the gangster takes his own bookkeeper hostage. Here, Stone dives in and saves the baby. Here, he takes aim. He waits for the word to shoot...

In that early morning, I retraced a choreographed gun battle of almost forty years ago, itself a fiction based on crimes of decades before. I live it in my head, as it happened – though of course it never did happen in reality, but only on celluloid.

“I think I’ll have a drink!”

Escaping from my fannish revelry, I bought my ticket and headed to Milwaukee on the splendidly-named ‘Hiawatha’ train.

After a day seeing more sights and partaking of “what made Milwaukee famous” (beer) I returned to Chicago. I walked up those railway station steps one more time.

Over a drink (Prohibition was long ago!) I listened to my partner telling me of her day at cataloguing standards meetings. Then I catalogued to her my travels through places at once real and cinematic.

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