Program notes for **Pinewood Dialogue with Sam Mendes** and screening of ***Road to Perdition***
July 8, 2002
Moving Image at the DGA

Road to Perdition
DreamWorks, 2002, 116 minutes. 35mm print courtesy of DreamWorks.
Directed by Sam Mendes. Written by David Self, from the graphic novel by Max Allan Collins and Richard Piers Rayner. Produced by Mendes, Dean Zanuck, and Richard D. Zanuck. Original music by Thomas Newman. Photographed by Conrad Hall. Editing by Jill Bilcock. Casting by Rachel Tenner and Debra Zane. Production design by Dennis Gassner. Art direction by Richard L. Johnson. Costume design by Albert Wolsky.
Principal cast: Tom Hanks (as Michael Sullivan), Paul Newman (John Rooney), Jude Law (Maguire), Jennifer Jason Leigh (Annie Sullivan), Stanley Tucci (Frank Nitti), Daniel Craig (Connor Rooney),Tyler Hoechlin (Michael Sullivan Jr.), and Liam Aiken (Peter Sullivan).

About Sam Mendes, from DreamWorks press kit:

Sam Mendes was already a celebrated theatre director when he made his feature film directorial debut on the Academy Award-winning Best Picture *American Beauty*, which was a box office smash and 1999's most honored film. Mendes won numerous Best Director awards for his work on *American Beauty*, including the Academy Award, a Golden Globe Award, the Directors Guild of America Award, the Los Angeles Film Critics Award and the Broadcast Film Critics Award, among others.
Mendes continues to direct for the theatre and has mounted award-winning productions on the stages of London and New York, and around the world. Perhaps his most noted triumph was his bold revival of the musical *Cabaret*, first in London and then on Broadway. The Broadway production garnered four Tony Awards, including one for Best Revival of a Musical, three Drama Desk Awards and three Outer Critics Circle Awards. Mendes also earned acclaim for his direction of the Broadway play *The Blue Room*, starring Nicole Kidman. He had previously directed the award-winning London production of *The Rise and Fall of Little Voice*, introducing Jane Horrocks, who reprised her role in the film version, Little Voice.

Born in England, Mendes was educated at Cambridge University and joined the Chichester Festival Theatre following his graduation in 1987. Soon after, he directed Dame Judi Dench in The Cherry Orchard, which brought him a Critics Circle Award for Best Newcomer. He then joined the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1990, where he directed such productions as Troilus and Cressida with Ralph Fiennes, Richard III and The Tempest, for which he earned an Olivier Award nomination.

In 1992, Mendes became artistic director of the reopened Donmar Warehouse in London where he directed numerous award-winning productions. During his tenure, he won Olivier Awards for Best Director for his work on the aforementioned Cabaret, The Glass Menagerie and Company. His other work at the Donmar includes Assassins, which won a Critics Circle Award, Translations, Glengarry Glen Ross, Habeas Corpus and The Front Page. Apart from the Donmar, his credits have included The Sea and The Plough and the Stars, both with Judi Dench, The Birthday Party, and Othello, which toured the world and for which he received another Olivier Award for Best Director.

In 2000, Mendes was named a Commander of the Order of the British Empire by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

"Circa 1931," from DreamWorks press kit:

The ensemble of talent in front of the camera was matched by the award-winning creative team assembled to work behind the camera, beginning with the man Sam Mendes calls "my central working relationship": cinematographer Conrad Hall, who also lensed American Beauty for the director. "I can't even describe how attached I've become to him and how immensely grateful I am to him," Mendes says. "In the midst of the chaos and the siege mentality that happens on a movie set, when Conrad puts his eye to the eyepiece of the camera, magic begins to happen. If you ask him how he knows where to point the camera, he'll tell you, 'I point it at the story.' But it's more than that; his artistry with light adds a dimension to the story that you could not have imagined. There is no such thing as an unimportant shot for him, and so he can drive you mad spending longer to light than you ever expected. But when you're in the screening room, you thank God every day for Conrad Hall."

Collaborating for the first time with the director were production designer Dennis Gassner, costume designer Albert Wolsky, and editor Jill Bilcock. “These are all very special people, incredibly gifted and at the top of their professions,” Mendes states, “It was like having an entire engine room of ideas and creative energy behind me.”

Road to Perdition is set in 1931 when the country was in the grip of the Great Depression, prohibition was still the law of the land, and gangsters like Al Capone were at the height of their power. Long before the cameras rolled, research was the order of the day for everyone involved in the production. “The challenges of a period movie are obvious,” Mendes comments. “Everything must be discussed in detail before you begin, because everything has to be made or re-created. It was also important to me that the movie pay witness to the time, rather than announce it. I want the audience to feel that they are looking through a window into this world, and I wanted to put a lie to some of the perceived notions about gangsters. You will see no double-breasted pinstripe suits, no spats, and only one machine gun, and that has a very specific and unusual presence in the movie.”

In at least one instance, the research resulted in a major thematic element of the film. Mendes reveals, “In planning the wake held at the beginning of the movie, we discovered they sometimes kept corpses on ice to stop the body from decomposing, and as the ice melted, the water would drip into buckets. The linking of water with death then became a recurring image in the film. It speaks of the mutability of water and links it to the uncontrollability of fate. These are things that humans can’t control. In other words, the dam might burst at any moment. All that came out of a tiny piece of research.”

Research was especially important for the movie’s design teams. Costume designer Albert Wolsky soon learned that re-creating the wardrobe of the times was made all the more challenging by the fact that its main distinction was its lack of distinction. “It’s not the hotsy totsy of the roaring ‘20s and it’s not the very slinky style of the mid-to-late ‘30s. It’s a very difficult period; it slips away from you in seconds,” he remarks.

As part of his research, Wolsky set out to find real clothing of the period, which was, in itself, problematic. He and his team looked throughout the United States and even Europe, but found that very little remained of the actual clothing. “It was the

Depression; nobody kept those clothes," Wolsky explains. "There was no reason to; they were just worn out clothes with nothing to commend them."

What articles of clothing they did manage to obtain served as patterns for some of the principal costumes. Using the actual clothing was impossible due to its delicate condition, as well as the need for multiples of each costume. "It's not like today. People then wore the same thing over and over. And in this movie in particular, once Michael Sullivan and his son are on the road, the changes are minimal—it's just the same suit, the same hat, the same coat…getting more and more worn," Wolsky states. "It means making more copies than you would usually need for normal wear and tear. And because we were shooting out of sequence, we couldn't use the same costume from day to day. It doesn't work that way."

The scarcity of authentic clothing and the demand for so many multiples meant the costumes would have to be manufactured from scratch, which led to another problem: Modern fabrics are much more lightweight so today's suits, for example, fall differently on the body than those of the early '30s. "Without the right fabric, you lose the period," Wolsky contends. "We tested the current fabrics and there was just no way to fake it. The weight dramatically affects the way the clothes move."

The only choice was to have the fabric specially woven in the correct weight for the period costumes. After some trial and error, Wolsky tracked down a weaver in upstate New York named Rabbit Goody, owner of Thistle Hill Weavers, who did what the costume designer says was "wonderful work" in weaving the enormous amount of fabric needed for the production. The new fabric then had to be aged and dyed to complete the effect.

Shades of brown, black and dark green comprised the dominant color palette for the costumes. Wolsky says, "I knew from Sam's description that it wasn't about individual details, it was about color and silhouettes. I also felt it was impossible to show the Depression in cheerful, bright colors, so I tried to pull back as much color as I could."

That approach fit in perfectly with what Conrad Hall was trying to achieve through the camera. "The film shouldn't be colorful, so I tried to make it as monochromatic as I could. It's not exactly film noir, more of a soft noir, if you will—soft shadows rather than harsh ones," the cinematographer offers. "I especially loved all the costumes with the hats. I could burn a light down and keep the face totally shaded."

Stage lights notwithstanding, makeup artist Daniel Streipeke's first edict to the cast was to stay out of the sun so they would have that Midwest-in-the-winter look, as opposed to California suntans. For Tom Hanks, Streipeke says, "We wanted to take some of the vulnerability out of his face. He needed to look like a powerful, tough guy, without being too clichéd about it."

The greatest transformation was reserved for Jude Law, whose good looks are obscured by Maguire's seedy countenance. "We gave Jude a sallow skin tone and beat up hands, which would come from being in a darkroom with his hands in photo fluids all the time," Streipeke describes. "We also lowered the gum line in his mouth and rotted his teeth, which works for the ferret-like character he plays."

Law also allowed hair stylist Kathryn Blondell to thin his hair. "It's very painstaking work and the initial cut took two days," Blondell relates. "I went section by section and hair by hair, cutting them out with very tiny scissors. I needed jeweler's glasses to do it."

"You can flesh out a character so much with those subtleties, which became very relevant to portraying Maguire because he says so little," Law notes. "He has to make a visual impression—not so obvious that he couldn't disappear into a crowd, but if you were to look closer, you'd see something a little off-center and slightly twisted."

The personalities and lives of the different characters were also reflected in the production design. "The design is all character-oriented," production designer Dennis Gassner affirms. "What Sam and I tried to do was come up with a variety of settings that support the mood of the characters, as well as the story."

Gassner points out that the Sullivan home is in cool blue tones, to reflect the wintry atmospher that exists both outside and inside the house. By comparison, the color scheme of the Rooney house is much warmer because, the designer points out, “although he is a gangster, he has a certain warmth and charm. He is also old money, so he has a classic sense of style.”

Road to Perdition was filmed entirely on location in Chicago, Illinois and the surrounding towns. “I wanted to shoot on location and, in Chicago, what you see on screen is what’s actually there. It still exists,” Mendes states.

The fact that it has existed for the better part of a century meant that Gassner and his team had to go in and turn the clock back 70 years. “Doing a period film is basically undoing what’s been done to a piece of art and then restyling it properly to fit the time,” the designer observes.

One area that needed little redressing was the Pullman area on the outskirts of Chicago, which is named for Henry Pullman who built the town for those building his Pullman trains. “The Pullman area has remained virtually untouched by the passage of time, so it became a location cornerstone for our film,” Gassner says. Among the shooting sites found in the Pullman area was the historic Florence Hotel, which was used for both interiors and exteriors, as well as a warehouse and an alleyway that became the settings for two pivotal confrontations.

The Illinois State Film Commission provided the filmmakers with another location mainstay when they helped the production team convert the Armory in Chicago into a soundstage, where the interiors of the Sullivan house and Rooney mansion were constructed. The exterior of the Sullivan home was found in the town of Barrington, Illinois, while the small community of West Dundee doubled for Rock Island, the town where the Sullivans and Rooneys live and where Michael Sullivan and his son begin their journey.

Rising in sharp contrast to those rural communities is the city of Chicago, which Mendes intended to be “a kind of Oz in the middle of the movie,” at least to young Michael Sullivan, who had never before ventured out of his hometown. Filming took place on La Salle Street in downtown Chicago, where the buildings of the period are juxtaposed with a few modern-day structures that would later be removed digitally. Dozens of vintage cars were obtained by the production to fill the street, along with hundreds of extras in period costumes that Albert Wolsky had designed to be decidedly more upscale than the small-town wardrobe seen earlier.

In what appears to be a series of different towns, one of the film's key sequences is the string of bank robberies perpetrated by Michael Sullivan. What was interesting was that Mendes had conceived of the sequence as a continuous tracking movement from left to right. Hall expounds, "Rather than as a montage, where shots fade out and fade in, Sam wanted the bank robberies to move from one directly into the other, without a cut in between."

The problem with that plan was that the action in one of the locations chosen for the robberies would only work shooting from right to left, but not from left to right. Rather than switch the plan, Gassner and his team switched the location, so to speak, by reversing every telltale element-including all the street signs, license plates, and even the steering wheels in the cars-to a mirror image. With that done, Mendes and Hall could shoot from right to left and flip the film to accomplish the desired left-to-right sequence.

For the bank robbery scenes, young Tyler Hoechlin had to learn to drive, and the then-13-year-old actor was only too happy to oblige. Stunt coordinator and second unit director Doug Coleman, who served as the driving instructor, says that the teenager did a wonderful job. Nevertheless, Coleman had a set of controls installed in the back seat for a stunt driver, just to be on the safe side.

The journey of Michael Sullivan and his son takes place mainly during the winter and, likewise, so did filming on Road to Perdition. The Midwest winter cold—which dropped to as low as minus-30 degrees-tested the endurance of the entire production team. "Winter in the Midwest is a pretty bleak time," Tom Hanks attests. "It was bitter cold, but I think that breeds a hardy type of person. You have to be tough to get through winters back there."

Though the air was freezing, the weather didn't always cooperate in providing the blanket of snow needed for some scenes. Special effects coordinator Allen Hall and his crew took over where Mother Nature left off, fabricating several football fields' worth of fake snow to create the wintry landscape. The effects team was also responsible for generating the drenching "rain" that was all-too-real for the cast and crew.

“There was an enormous amount of manufactured weather. We had snow, rain, ice, sleet, you name it. And let me tell you, they don’t always mix; they become a kind of awful mush,” Mendes laughs. “There were times I cursed the day I ever decided that the first 20 minutes of the movie should take place in a snowscape. But,” he notes, “there was a very deliberate reason for it. The reason there is snow and ice in the opening of the story is it symbolizes a frozen world…frozen in the emotional sense. It’s a paralyzed family until the father and oldest son are thrown together by tragedy and they begin to have the relationship they never had before. So out of the bad comes good, and everything that was intended to be set in ice at the beginning begins to thaw.”

Dean Zanuck reflects, “Michael Sullivan and his son start the movie far apart from each other, but a terrible turn of events brings them very much together. It’s an emotional journey as much as a physical one that they go through.”

“It’s an exploration into a man’s relationship with his son, and of how a fuller and more meaningful relationship is brought about by tragedy. That is the crux of the story,” Richard Zanuck remarks.

“At the center of the film is the relationship between a father and a son, but there are actually two fathers and two sons,” Mendes adds. “One of the great ironies of the film is that, although the two fathers love each other, in each having to protect his less favored son, they are set on a course of mutual destruction.”

The director concludes, “That is the core of the story: two men protecting their children. In the end, what can be more important than that?”

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