

Chinatown-1974: Where you never know what's really going on, especially in Chinatown....

Philosophically, the story of J.J. 'Jake' Gittes (Jack Nicholson) is almost a tragedy: once he was a cop in Chinatown, and made a blunder that cost a woman her life. Now, in this narrative, he's a tough, cynical but fair-minded PI and is about to ignore history – and, as we know, those who ignore it are bound to repeat it....

You see, Jake was hired to expose the putative extra-marital affair of one Hollis Mulwray, a big wig with the water Board for the City of Los Angeles. Trouble is, Mulwray doesn't behave like a man on an affair, but more like one on a mission. So, Jake's intrigued, and even more so as the intrigue deepens when Mulwray turns up dead – drowned. And, as Jake discovers further, murdered.

Tangled up in the murder is, of course, Mrs Mulwray (Faye Dunaway) who, at first, tries to obstruct Jake but later engages his services to find out who killed Hollis. Along the tortuous way, Jake bumps into Noah Cross (John Huston), Mrs Mulwray's father, who just happened to have been partner to Hollis Mulwray years earlier. Cross, in turn, engages Jake to find the young woman who was supposed to be having an affair with Hollis. Why is Cross so interested in that young woman? Indeed....

That's what Jake wants to know too; and the only person he can ask is Mrs Mulwray who, as the story progresses, the LAPD suspect as being the killer of Hollis. But is she? Jake's determined to find out, and so sets an elaborate trap for the person he thinks did the dirty job of killing Hollis; and also devises a daring plan to get Mrs Mulwray to Mexico and beyond the reach of his one-time buddies at the LAPD. Why does Jake do the latter? Because he's in love with her, or so he thinks, and is willing to risk his career, jail, loss of PI license or whatever, to make sure she stays free. Trouble is, Jake doesn't realize he's made a terrible blunder again ... when he meets her in Chinatown.

In the great tradition of film-noir, Chinatown ranks with the best. The period mise-en-scene is picture perfect; the music soundtrack is quintessentially moody; the dialog is cracking with one-liners and irony; the femme fatale is disturbingly haunting, twice over, as you will discover.

The overall production testifies to the great expense and detail that brought the whole story and cast together. Add the standout performances from Jack Nicholson, Faye Dunaway and John Huston for the icing to a layer cake mystery that will stay with you for a long, long time.

Arguably Polanski's best directorial effort and one, in my opinion, that should have won the Oscar for that year. They just don't make movies like this any more. Pity.

Highly recommended.

Rating: 9

2nd January, 2008.

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