

'Suspicion' portrays era of fear, rage

By Gerri Pare

Catholic News Service

NEW YORK (CNS) — Robert De Niro is a film director facing an agonizing choice in "Guilty by Suspicion" (Warner Bros.).

In the early 1950s an investigation by the House Un-American Activities Committee into Hollywood ties to the Communist Party produced paralyzing fear in the creative community.

Apolitical and unconcerned, David Merrill (De Niro) returns from Europe to meet with major studio head Darryl Zanuck (Ben Piazza) about directing a new film. Zanuck instead orders him to see an attorney (Sam Wanamaker), who advises David to voluntarily testify before Congress.

He won't get any future film assignments unless he "purges" himself for attending a few left-wing meetings in the past. More disturbing is the second condition of employment — he must name several suspected communist sympathizers, including his best friend Baxter (George Wendt), whom he knows was never "red." Merrill walks out, confident he can direct for other studios.

He soon finds out how devastating his code of honor is to his personal life. He is shunned everywhere by former friends, his agent and especially anyone who could hire him. As his money runs out, he is forced to move in with his ex-wife (Annette Bening), until, totally demoralized, he faces the issue squarely in the halls of Congress.

Longtime producer Irwin Winkler's first film as writer and director is a fine effort. Although the time frame could be better delineated, Winkler carefully builds the atmosphere of near paranoia that started in the late '40s and resulted in the blacklisting of many innocent people in the entertainment industry.

De Niro is riveting as the victim, who after years of neglecting his wife and small son in selfish pursuit of his career, finds integrity in adversity. He makes this path to self-discovery a compelling trip, lacking neither suspense nor surprise.

Patricia Wettig ("thirtysomething") plays an actress denounced by her own husband and driven to suicide in a scene of touching desperation. Wendt ("Cheers") has a meaty role as the buddy so intimidated by the witch hunt he is ready to name his closest friend. "You're dead already," is how he justifies his plans to Merrill.

The period design of the film is detailed and authentic-looking while the Hollywood in-jokes and references will be lost on the average viewer.

Using history as a point of departure, the story takes on a nightmarish reality since the fictional characters had their real-life counterparts.

"Guilty by Suspicion" is a well-told morality tale that effectively dramatizes a tragic period for Hollywood that ruined lives and affected the content of movies and television for years afterward.

Due to a scene of suicide and occasional rough language, the U.S. Catholic Conference classification is A-II — adults and adolescents. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG-13 — parents are strongly cautioned that some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.



Warner Bros. Inc. During hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee, David Merrill (Robert De Niro) and his wife, Ruth (Annette Bening), face reporters' questions in *Guilty by Suspicion*, a dramatic look at Hollywood blacklisting in the 1950s.

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