

The Trial of the Chicago 7

“The Trial of the Chicago 7” is the latest film version of one of America’s most bizarre and surreal federal trials: the charging of several anti-Vietnam War protesters for criminal conspiracy and incitement of riot during the 1968 Democratic Party convention, which process was both a parody of justice and a singular show trial. That trial has provided writer/director Aaron Sorkin with a great vehicle to bring it to the screen and inform recent generations (*the film, available on Netflix, is rated “R” and runs a headlong 129 minutes*).

Politically-minded filmgoers might know some of the highlights of this five-month (September 1969 to March 1970) marathon case: the wildly disparate defendants (from the “Mobe,” the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the Yippies, the Black Panthers), the grotesque rulings of Judge Julius Hoffman (Frank Langella), the overall goofiness of the Yippies, the binding and gagging of Panther leader Bobby Seale (Yahya Abdul-Mateen II), the blizzard of contempt citations against defense attorney William Kunstler (Mark Rylance)—the whole bloody mess.

All this and much more is shown in the film, some of it taken from the trial and media records, though much of the story is Sorkin’s invention, especially the scenes showing the defendants and their lawyers holed up in a safe house discussing legal strategies and their own mixed motives. For added pace, the script also jettisons weeks and weeks of witnesses on both sides (the cops and local authorities vs. noted politicians and celebrities). Also, Sorkin creates a backstory for the young lead prosecutor, Richard Schultz (Joseph Gordon-Levitt), carrying out the wishes of Attorney General John Mitchell (John Doman).

Sorkin has been in the courtroom before: his first movie script was the court martial drama, “A Few Good Men” (1992), also full of both legal tensions and a starry cast. While “A Few Good Men” was full-out drama, the first half of “Chicago 7” has a jaunty, even ribald air, mainly through the antics of Jerry Rubin (Jeremy Strong) and Abbie Hoffman (Sasha Baron Cohen). One exemplary scene—which really happened—shows the two Yippies coming to court clad in judge’s robes, and when ordered to disrobe, they have on Chicago PD uniforms (whooping laughter!). When the trial gets down to business, however, serious themes dominate, and the suspects’ cohesion—never stout—begins to fray.

You can count on Sorkin to deliver both flashy, smart exchanges as well as sheets of bristling monologue, and most of his cast handles these devices well. Cohen plays Abbie Hoffman as a learned jester, showing off moves as both a practicing comic as well as a courtroom wit. Jeremy Strong, as Rubin, is a merry prankster high on drugs while in court, and Eddie Redmayne, effective as Tom Hayden of SDS, personifies the earnest intellectual with an ethical fault which could ruin the 7’s case. Odd men out include Abdul-Mateen II as the rage-infused Seale, an uncompromising Panther, as well as the pacifist John Carroll Lynch as David Dellinger, a soft-spoken, well-mannered adult among young radicals.

Another contrast concerns the two chief lawyers: Rylance, firm but restrained, as the dogged liberal Kunstler, a measured soul trying to keep his unruly clients in line, and Gordon-Levitt as Schultz, a bright and committed federal prosecutor who comes to question his own government’s case. In his own wacky world is the florid, almost

baroque, Langella as the judge, a specter of a legal mind unhinged, lost in an authoritarian world of his own making. These actors and other fine featured players, give their best in serving Sorkin's intricate and utterly entertaining words.