

Real-Life Scrooge



By Gerard Condon

MONEY might make the world go around but, as a new Ridley Scott thriller points out, it does not make it a happy place. *All the Money in the World* is based on the true story of John Paul Getty III (played by Charlie Plummer). On July 10, 1973, at the age of 16, he was kidnapped in Rome by the 'Ndrangheta, a branch of the Italian mafia. Their motive was ransom. Their victim was the grandson of American oil magnate, John Paul Getty (Christopher Plummer; no relation to his screen grandchild), reputedly the richest man in the history of the world. He refused to pay the \$17 million demanded because of the risk that a similar fate would befall his thirteen other grandchildren. Besides, the child had recently been disinherited, following his mother's (Gail, played by Michelle Williams) decision to divorce the boy's father, John Paul Getty Jr. (Andrew Buchan). He was a drug addict and she preferred to secure custody of their children to a financial settlement.

Maternal love is stronger than greed in Ridley Scott's new movie: All the Money in the World

Scrooge grandfather

Truth be told, grandfather Getty's real reason for not paying the ransom was his stinginess. He was a notorious Scrooge, the kind of man who would wash his shirts in a bathtub rather than having them professionally laundered. He would have guests to his English country mansion pay for telephone calls from a public phone booth. Nonetheless he had a soft spot for his grandchild "little Paul": nine years earlier they had strolled, hand in hand, through the ruins of Imperial Rome. It was Getty Sr. who had brought the family to Rome in an effort to reconnect with his estranged son. But John Paul Jr. turned out to be a wastrel. His grandson, too, was growing up to be a rebellious teenager who courted danger.

Throughout his life, the boy's Number One advocate was his mother, Gail. It is her steadfast love (as dramatized by Williams) that gives the movie its impetus. At first she, like the police, wonders if John Paul has just run away or even arranged his own kidnapping, as a way of extracting money from the "old man." She travels to England to plead for help, but Getty Sr. refuses even to meet her. He does, however, appoint one of his oil company troubleshooters, Fletcher Chace (Mark Wahlberg) an ex-CIA operative, to work with her and the *Carabinieri* (Italian military police) to secure Paul's release "as quickly and as inexpensively as possible."

At the outset the teenager sees his kidnapping as an adventure. He strikes up a friendship, of sorts, with one of the captors, "Cinquanta" (Romain Duris, in a gritty performance),

at their remote hideout. The kidnappers' demeanor changes as the months go by without a ransom being paid. They begin, as criminals often do, to argue among themselves, and become more desperate, threatening to dismember their prisoner. Their movements eventually create a trail for the ex-CIA man and the *Carabinieri* to follow. Getty Sr., meantime, is unmoved by the publicity surrounding the case. It is only when the kidnappers reduce their demand to \$4 million, and cut off their hostage's ear, that he opens negotiations, and only then because much of the ransom can be written off against taxes.

Production

The cost of this movie, estimated at \$50 million, is evident in its excellent production qualities. The edgy, socially unstable atmosphere of 1970s Italy is well captured. Even the sweaty criminals exude *bella figura*. Eighty-year-old Ridley Scott, applies the formula he has previously used in *Gladiator* (2000), *Black Hawk Down* (2001), and *Robin Hood* (2010), dramatizing an historical event with a combination of intelligent dialogue and well-shot action sequences. Even though the audience may already know the outcome, the director still manages to create a suspenseful atmosphere.

Christopher Plummer has been Oscar nominated for his portrayal of the miserly J. Paul Getty. His performance is remarkable because the 82-year-old was given the part *after* the movie had been completed. The role of the billionaire was originally filmed with Kevin Spacey, but he was fired having been accused of sexu-

Christopher Plummer, left, and director Ridley Scott at the world premiere of *All the Money in the World* at the Samuel Goldwyn Theatre in Beverly Hills, California, 18 December 2017

al misconduct. The reshooting was achieved over the course of just nine days, last November, at an estimated cost of \$10 million. Critics have hailed the last minute re-edit as a major technical achievement. In one shot, in the Arabian Desert, it is obviously Spacey, not Plummer, who is playing the part of Getty Sr.

Moral ambiguity

In this movie, as in any good tale, the struggle between good and evil is not clear-cut. Yes, the criminal gangs are obviously villains, but they, and others, were also the victims of exploitation. In the 1950s J. Paul Getty had come up with the idea of the supertanker as a means of transporting cheap Arabian oil to the West. It was Getty, more than the Sheiks, who benefitted from the arrangement. So, yes, while the kidnappers had broken the Seventh Commandment (*Thou shalt not steal*), taking what was not

Michelle Williams, left, and Mark Wahlberg, right, in *All the Money in the World*, a film based on a true story



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theirs, John Paul Getty might also be accused of theft. He infringed the spirit if not the letter of the Seventh Commandment, by hoarding excessive profits, avoiding taxation, and not using his great wealth for the common good.

Christopher Plummer humanizes the character of Getty Sr., and has him demonstrate flickers of good conscience. At one point he confides to Fletcher Chase that “things, objects, artifacts, paintings” are more reliable than people: “They never change, they never disappoint.” He adds, “There is a purity to beautiful things that I have never been able to find in another human being.” Getty may have had all the money in the world, but in terms of relationships he was living in poverty. His daughter-in-law’s priorities, on the other

hand, were unambiguously good. It was a fitting irony, as the closing credits point out, that most of the Getty fortune was distributed among charities, by his heirs, in the decades following his death.

Life imitating art

Following his release from captivity, John Paul Getty III is said to have telephoned his grandfather to thank him for paying the ransom. It is claimed that Getty refused to take the call. Within a year he married the actress Gisela Schmidt, and had a child (Balthasar Getty, now an actor and film producer). He was, however, traumatized by the kidnapping, and a drug overdose in 1981 left him partially blind and paralyzed until his death in 2011. His mother lives to this day in London.

John Paul Getty died in 1976, just three years after the kidnapping of his grandchild. In his will, he left his son a mere \$500 and his grandson nothing. His art-collection is housed in the Getty Museum in Los Angeles. The final scenes of the movie show the old man rambling through the halls of his English mansion, frightened and alone. He snatches a favorite painting off the wall, a Madonna with the Infant Jesus, collapses onto a chair and mumbles, “Beautiful child!” All too late he had realised that it is love, not money, which makes the world go around. ♦