

Bulger victims object to Depp's comments - The Boston Globe

Johnny Depp's portrayal of James "Whitey" Bulger in the film "Black Mass" captured his unvarnished brutality, but the actor's comments on the red carpet at Tuesday night's premiere in Brookline rankled relatives of some of the gangster's victims.

Outside the Coolidge Corner Theatre, Depp said that there is humanity in everyone, even Bulger, who was in a violent business but had another side to him.

"There's a kind heart in there," Depp said in a brief exchange that was aired on WCVB. "There's a cold heart in there. There's a man who loves. There's a man who cries. There's a lot to the man."

Advertisement

The comments infuriated Bill St. Croix, whose 26-year-old sister, Deborah Hussey, was strangled to death by Bulger in 1985.

"I wonder how Johnny Depp would feel if his sister got strangled and buried in the basement with two other corpses?" St. Croix said.

"There's nothing humane about Jimmy Bulger. . . . Shame on [Depp]. That was a very stupid, insensitive comment."

ADVERTISING

Hussey was lured to the house where she was killed by Bulger's sidekick, Stephen Flemmi, who was like a stepfather to Hussey and had St. Croix and two other children with her mother.

Flemmi's other son, Stephen Hussey, who attended Tuesday's screening, which included a gruesome scene of his sister's murder, said, "As hard it was for me to see the premiere, I honestly don't think it glorified Bulger. I think it portrayed him as an evil psychopath."

Patricia Donahue, whose husband Michael Donahue was shot to death by Bulger in 1982, said she does not plan to see "Black Mass" and was offended by Depp's comments.

"I think he should have spoken to the victims before he took on this movie or got the papers from the trial to see how these victims felt and what [Bulger] was really like," Donahue said. "The people who are human are the people who were killed, not Bulger. He's a sicko, a psycho."

Advertisement

Bulger, 86, is serving a life sentence for his 2013 conviction for participating in 11 murders while running a sprawling criminal enterprise from the 1970s to the 1990s.

Many of the victims' families thought they would never see Bulger held accountable for his crimes. The longtime FBI informant was warned by a corrupt former agent to flee just before his 1995 indictment and remained a fugitive for 16 years. He was captured in 2011 in Santa Monica, Calif., with girlfriend, Catherine Greig.

An Associated Press story on Tuesday also quoted Depp saying, "No disrespect to any victims or families of victims, but there was some element for me that was kind of glad that he got away. For 16 years he was on the lam and he wasn't causing any trouble. He was living his life. Good on him."

Donahue said Depp was focusing too much on the gangster he played. "This is not Hollywood, this is the real thing here," she said. "How can you be glad that someone who killed a lot of people goes on the run? How can you have compassion for that person knowing what he's done?"

Tim Connors, whose father Edward Connors was shot to death by Bulger in 1975, said he was not troubled by Depp's words. "I guess everybody has at least some good in him, but any good [Bulger] has in

him is definitely overshadowed by all the bad he's done," Connors said.

Advertisement

On Tuesday night, Depp said the most difficult part of the Bulger role involved "trying to ride the tightrope between what is true, what is considered true, and what is, obviously, very very true for the victims and their families."

Depp, who has never met Bulger, added, "No matter how good that person is deemed, no matter how bad that person is deemed, by anyone and everyone, my responsibility was to do my best to represent him in a human light." Boston attorney J.W. Carney Jr., who represented Bulger during his trial, attended Tuesday's premiere and applauded Depp for giving "a riveting portrayal" of Bulger.

"The limitations of time allowed only glimpses of Jim Bulger's other qualities, especially his intelligence, wit, and ability to truly love someone," Carney said. "When Johnny stared at the audience with his ice-blue eyes during certain scenes, the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. It was that real to me."

Dick Lehr, a former Boston Globe reporter who coauthored the book, "Black Mass," with Gerard O'Neill that the film is based on, said he believed Depp and the movie's director, Scott Cooper, were referring to scenes about the death of Bulger's young son when they spoke of humanizing him.

"If they didn't have moments like that, I think we'd see nonstop murder," said Lehr, adding that Depp's comments were from an actor referring to the role that he played. "I think what he was trying to say is Whitey Bulger does not look at himself in the mirror and say, 'I am a hands-on, cold-blooded killer who is the most evil man on the planet.' "

Advertisement

Members of the team that investigated and prosecuted Bulger praised the actors after attending the premiere, particularly Depp and Joel Edgerton, who portrayed corrupt former FBI agent John J. Connolly Jr.

Former federal prosecutor Brian T. Kelly said, "I think it was worth seeing because it certainly shows Bulger was an evil psychopath. It exposes the corruption that allowed his gang to flourish and eventually the good guys win."

Retired State Police Detective Lieutenant Bob Long, who spent years targeting Bulger, said, "When I was watching Johnny Depp on the screen, I actually thought I was looking at Whitey Bulger."

Watch Depp's comments below:

Shelley Murphy can be reached at Shelley.Murphy@globe.com.