

SUNDAY TELEGRAPH 20.9.87 CINEMA

Slaughterhouse of De Palma

WHEN Ben Hecht wrote the screenplay of "Scarface" (1932), two hard-eyed strangers knocked on his door at midnight. "Is this the stuff about Al Capone?" they asked. No, said Hecht: the title was only a come-on. "I'll tell Al. Who's this fellow Howard Hughes?" "He's the sucker with the money." "OK. The hell with him." And they left.

Twenty-five years later Eliot Ness, the Prohibition agent who had caught Capone on income-tax charges, wrote a book on the case. Soon afterwards, he died of a heart attack. And in 1959, when CBS televised Ness's story, Capone's widow sued for a million dollars. Fortunately she lost.

So "Take care" (as Capone used to warn hostile witnesses) might be good advice to Brian De Palma, director of *The Untouchables* (15; Empire, Leicester Square).

The film takes its title from Ness's book, the CBS broadcast, and a weekly series later screened by ABS. Lean, callow, wary-eyed Kevin Costner plays Ness; and his opponent—the Eliot Ness Monster, or Mobster—is brilliantly portrayed by Robert De Niro, who put on 50lbs for the part.

After monumental opening titles, with Ennio Morricone's music hammering our attention, an overhead crane shot shows

RICHARD MAYNE on a new view of Capone et al

Capone lolling in a barber's chair, flanked by bodyguards, in the Lexington Hotel, Chicago, his principal base. As soft and sinister as Field Marshal Goring, he exudes menace. It soon explodes, literally, when a small girl runs after a man she thinks has left his briefcase in a bar by mistake. The bartender has refused to pay his dues.

Carnage harnesses our sympathy for Ness and his vulnerable young family. At first he fails, bulldozing a warehouse to find not hooch but Japanese novelties. The cops are on the take, and someone has talked. But with the help of an old Irish patrolman (Sean Connery with a serviceable accent,) Ness recruits his team from the Police Academy: "If you're afraid of getting a rotten apple, don't go to the barrel—get it off the tree."

The recruits are the Untouchables, schematised to four in David Mamet's adroit script: Ness, Malone, Stone (an Italo-American cop *né* Petri,) and Wallace, a Federal accountant, played with touching comedy by Charles Martin Smith. Two of them are slaughtered before the film ends: but Capone gets his 11-year tax-fraud sentence after

the judge has replaced the original bribed jury.

This actually happened. There was also a real Malone, sometimes known as O'Rourke, although he was an undercover agent who could pass as Italian. Wallace seems to be based on Frank J. Wilson, the bespectacled Internal Revenue agent who led the group inspecting Capone's books. To this extent the film is authentic; and it lovingly reconstructs a slightly sepia Old Chicago, with vintage cars and gangsters in fedoras, loud suits, spats and two-tone shoes.

Yet for all its gloss, I found "The Untouchables" unlikable. The only arrests made here by Ness's crusaders seem to have been cardiac. In the film, Ness even kills Capone's "enforcer," Frank Nitti, who in fact lived on to meet a violent end in 1943. His film death is an operatic Hitchcock swoop from a high building. And De Palma also echoes Eisenstein's "Battleship Potemkin" in an equally stylised scene at Union Station, with a pram in the midst of a massacre tittuping down the marble, Odessa-like steps.

Capone's life was admittedly a mixture of greed, corruption, savage cruelty and sentimental tripe. Hence the many books and films about him. But his Chicago was a richer, more ambivalent and gruesomely comic place than this old-fashioned battleground of vice and

virtue, à la "Dragnet". The Volstead Act—Prohibition—spawned bootlegging. As Capone remarked on his way to Atlanta Penitentiary, "They ought to make it legitimate." Bad law makes hard cases. It could have made a better film.

★ ★ ★

TRY NOT to miss *Miss Mary* (15; Curzon Phoenix). In this, Julie Christie plays an English governess with an English-speaking Argentine family from 1958 to 1945. Its director, Maria Luisa Bemberg, seems to have a fallacious, agit-prop view of history. She forgets that Hipólito Irigoyen, the Radical President deposed by a military coup in 1950, had become conservative before his fall; and she hails Juan Perón rather as a democrat than as a fascist.

But apart from tendentious opening and closing titles, and a few lines of dialogue ("Do you think my family is mad? Do you think we have too much money?"), the film could almost have been made by James Ivory. In enchanting sunlight, it explores the clash and intertwining of two cultures, against a background of charming period songs.

I liked the luxury—and the jokes. "What's a Socialist?" ask the children. "In England, we call them robbers," the governess replies.

MEDIA