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Warner Bros. goes gangster

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Those hankering for more "Departed"-like movies from Hollywood -- original movies with well-paced action, a strong sense of place and a cross-section of colorful characters - - will probably get their itch tickled when "The Town," Ben Affleck's Boston-set crime drama, hits in the fall.

Now it looks as if they could be getting another scratch as "Tales from the Gangster Squad," an action movie conceived as an ensemble piece for a group of top-level actors, picks up momentum.

The film, based on a series of 2008 articles in the Los Angeles Times by Paul Lieberman, examines an LAPD unit that's set up in the 1940s to fend off the growing influence of the East Coast Mafia in the city. Of course the police group becomes very powerful, the battles with the Mafia escalate, and mayhem and betrayals ensue.

Sources say that Will Beall, an up-and-coming writer (he wrote a novel called "L.A. Rex" that Scott Rudin optioned, and which Beall then adapted for Rudin) was hired as the "Gangster Squad" screenwriter and has just completed his draft of the script. The film has a strong pedigree: it's set up at Warner Bros., which has made a cottage industry out of textured gangster pictures with both "Departed" and "The Town," and is being produced by Dan Lin and Kevin McCormick (who as Warners studio executives worked on "The Departed").

"Gangster Squad" is conceived as a vehicle with big stars a la "The Departed," though for non-remake movies at the studios these days budget is always a priority, so it's an open question how many high-priced types will be able to come on, and at what price. Look for a well-known director to come on board too (no names yet, but filmmakers and their representatives are beginning to get wind of it).

A year ago this week brought the last entry in the big-budget studio gangster movie, Michael Mann's "Public Enemies," a movie that was a creative disappointment and also didn't earn back its hefty budget. But that was more of a character piece than an action movie. At the right budget and with a healthy amount of thrills and action, "Gangster Squad," mob pictures in general and even the anti-remake boomlet could be back on the streets.

-- Steven Zeitchik

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Photo: LAPD officers inspecting the scene after a drive-by shooting. Credit: Los Angeles Times file photo