

Moral Minority: "3:10 to Yuma" and "The Brothers Solomon"

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 12 September 2007 02:28

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3:10 TO YUMA

James Mangold's dramatic Western *3:10 to Yuma*, the remake of a Glenn Ford oater from a half-century ago, is a tough, effective, frequently powerful piece of work. Yet despite its authentic period design and supremely intelligent performances, it feels a little lightweight; a few hours after seeing it, you may not remember much about the experience except having had a good time. Especially considering Hollywood output of late,

3:10 to Yuma

is hardly a disappointment, but for all of its thematic richness, the movie is rather generic - it's a modern-day action blockbuster in Old West attire. The film is everything except moving, and I have a sneaking suspicion that Mangold desperately

wants

it to be.

Certainly, the director has cast actors who are up for the job. Russell Crowe plays Ben Wade, a dandified robber and killer whose sociopathic tendencies are tempered by a quick wit and an endless capacity for self-amusement. Christian Bale portrays Dan Evans, a proud, humorless rancher approaching financial ruin. As Evans, for a \$200 fee, agrees to help escort Wade to the train of the film's title (which will, in turn, escort the villain to prison), the two men form an unexpected bond, and Crowe and Bale play their mutual fascination/contempt with exquisite subtlety and emotional shadings. Crowe, his eyes twinkling, reveals Wade's growing affection

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for Evans and his unwavering righteousness - he appears to be the one decent man on the prairie - and Bale, with internalized forcefulness, suggests a man aching to be freed from the constraints of nobility.

It's a good, weighty storyline, and it's performed with grace, so why does it barely register? Probably because we're so distracted by the kick-ass spectacle surrounding it. Mangold stages the film's numerous showdowns and shoot-outs with thrilling panache, and as Evans' traveling posse (which includes Peter Fonda and Alan Tudyk) finds itself hunted by Wade's cohorts (led by a malevolent Ben Foster, who narrowly escapes cartoonishness), the director elongates and escalates the tension with vibrant dramatic skill. *3:10 to Yuma* reminds us that, before helming such character-driven awards bait as

Girl, Interrupted

and

Walk the Line

, Mangold delivered 1997's lean, nasty

Cop Land

, and he's sensationally fine at maintaining an expectant, queasily enjoyable atmosphere of dread.

In truth, the ripping action scenes have the unintentional effect of making *3:10 to Yuma*'s character-driven ones feel like impediments to the action, as does Mangold's tendency to telegraph his leads' moral dilemmas through somewhat heavy-handed composition and obvious musical cues. (The movie is a bit Ron Howard-y.) Yet, what

3:10 to Yuma

is lacking in art is handily made up in entertainment value, even if its most intriguing elements are the ones we barely have the opportunity to notice.



THE BROTHERS SOLOMON

For an R-rated comedy without Judd Apatow's name on it, *The Brothers Solomon* is incredibly sweet-tempered, and the key to its (admittedly limited) success can be found in the opening

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credits. There's not much to them - just extreme closeups of Will Arnett and Will Forte (who also wrote the script) smiling at the names on-screen, and at us. But the actors bring more comic intensity to their nearly immobile expressions than many performers do with reams of dialogue. Their relentlessly cheerful grins are wholly endearing and just a little scary - Forte has the dazed calm of recent lobotomy patient, while Arnett's eyes gleam with almost maniacal happiness - and their eventual banter has the same tender-loopy quality. These guys may be criminally stupid, but they're

sincere

; their unwavering optimism allows us to laugh at them

and

with them.

The movie, which concerns their plan to co-father a baby, is about brotherly love (its best scene is the sibs' tearful reconciliation after a fight), and Arnett and Forte, with contrasting comic styles that mesh perfectly, play their delirious, fraternal romance to the hilt.

The Brothers Solomon isn't great. Technically, it doesn't much qualify as *good*. After that opening-credits sequence, director Bob Odenkirk continues to frame his cast members in closeups that are way

too

close - the movie looks like it was filmed for television, where it will no doubt play better - and the editing isn't very sharp; scene-cappers tend to be held for a few seconds longer than necessary, as if Odenkirk were waiting for our laughter to subside before moving on. (Watching the movie is occasionally like watching a TV sitcom that's filmed in front of a studio audience, without hearing the

reactions

of the studio audience.)

But the film is filled with sensational jokes. There's some choice material on the brothers' shared taste in videotapes and an inspired running motif involving the *St. Elmo's Fire* theme song (Odenkirk and Forte appear to have as much affectionate disdain for it as

we

do), and the climax - a sky-writing routine that, miraculously, becomes more and more inventive as it progresses - is a total hoot. And while

The Brothers Solomon

isn't a very strong movie, it's a terrific showcase for Arnett and Forte, who, by fully committing to their slow-witted yet helplessly lovable characters, manage to make even gross, lame gags appealing. Where there are Wills, there are ways.