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Wednesday, 05 July 2000 06:00

THE PATRIOT

In this analysis of *The Patriot*, the Revolutionary War saga starring Mel Gibson, let's begin by addressing that which is mostly blameless - Caleb Deschanel's cinematography. Whether lensing a battle scene, featuring what appear to be thousands of extras in red and blue coats, or a romantic tableau in the moonlight, Mr. Deschanel's work is impeccable; he's one of the best in the business. Ditto the folks behind the set design and costumes, which look marvelously right in their period detail and lend the film more than an air of authenticity.

But, with only a couple more exceptions, that's where my praise stops.

Because *The Patriot*, for all its grandeur and noble aspirations, is a terrible movie, maddening in its obviousness, generally misdirected (by Roland Emmerich), and, more often than not, poorly performed. I should also point out that I'm probably going to be in a distinct minority on this one; the audience I saw the movie with last weekend seemed to love it, laughing and wincing and sighing at all the "appropriate" moments. Of course they did - aided by John Williams' insanely overbearing musical score, director Emmerich doesn't leave the audience room for an honest reaction or thought; every little payoff in the movie is telegraphed far in advance, and his staging leaves no room for subtlety or imagination. I probably don't have a hope in hell of convincing those who fell for Emmerich's machinations that *The Patriot* sucks. The best I can do is explain why it didn't work for me, and offer solace to the few of you who might have felt as underwhelmed as I did.

Gibson plays Benjamin Martin, widowed father of seven, whose tranquil family life in South Carolina is interrupted by the news that our country is going to war against the British. Martin, who fought in the French and Indian War, is initially against the conflict, particularly when it raises the patriotic ire of his eldest son (Heath Ledger), who is aching to join in the battle. But after a series of atrocities, including a major one against his own family, Martin is convinced to join the battle, becoming a vicious, guerrilla-like leader of men in a war that prefers its fighters to act like "gentlemen," and overseeing the actions of his son, who begins to learn a thing or two about his father's past.

Benjamin Martin is the type of role that Gibson usually plays to perfection, and that's the problem. We've seen this regular-guy-turning-borderline-psychotic side of him in so many films - *Lethal Weapon, Hamlet, Braveheart, Ransom* - that there's no surprise left in it anymore. He's as sincere as ever, but it's a going-through-the-motions performance, earnest and likable and never challenging for a moment. He's still the moviemakers' trump card, though; Emmerich and screenwriter Robert Rodat would have to screw things up big time for *The Patriot* to not work.

And that they do. Part of the problem is that, for all the authenticity of the period details, the movie is, at heart, a pulpy revenge story, wherein Mad Mel battles the British baddies who've wronged him. (They're led by Jason Isaacs in the most arched, prissy, embarrassingly mannered bad-guy performance since Doug Hutchison's in *The Green Mile*.) The makes the tone of *The Patriot* remarkably similar to that of Mel's *Braveheart* (and the recent *Gladiator*), which also dealt with a reluctant hero's vengeful attacks. Roland Emmerich, though, doesn't appear to have Mel's passion for the subject matter. Emmerich stages a few of the attacks with brio - he demonstrates the *ridiculousness* of the warring armies standing directly opposite each other and opening fire - but doesn't have anything to say about patriotism, or honor, or any feeling that doesn't involve bloodshed; he's caught up in the revenge fantasy of *The Patriot*, but not in how that fantasy affects the characters, or the war itself. It's a completely impersonal epic, as if Emmerich and Rodat combined all the elements of *Braveheart, Unforgiven*, and *Saving Private Ryan,* and then surgically removed the characters.

And the clichés! And the telegraphing *of* the clichés! In a comedy or fantasy, when you see motifs and hear lines that you're sure will have pay-offs - punchlines - later in the film, it doesn't really bother you, and it's sometimes even tickling to see how they'll work themselves out. But in a historical drama like this one, when you see props like a young girl's North Star necklace or a child's iron-soldier toys, you just *know* they're going to resurface later to tear your heart out, and it begins to infuriate you. In *The Patriot*

, you might have a similar reaction to (in no special order): the youngest daughter, who has never spoken a word (ooo... when *will* she?); the dogs of General Cornwallis (Tom Wilkinson, amazingly centered and touching amidst the dreck) that he loves unashamedly (ooo... what'll Mel *do* to them?); Mel hissing at his primary foe "Before this war is over, I will kill you" (ooo... how *will* he?). This type of thing goes on for the duration of the film, and I began to hate *The Patriot* more and more as it progressed.

With the exception of Wilkinson, the cast rarely helps matters. Heath Ledger is likable enough but shows precious little depth, and becomes completely inconsequential when stuck in his romantic sub-plot with dreary Lisa Brenner. Joely Richardson and Chris Cooper have no material to work with, and the young performers playing Mel's kids are at best forgettable and at worst odious. With the exception of the often-impressive visual design of the film, the only joy I took in *The Patriot* was watching the boom mic at the top of the screen nearly knock actors in the head. That's a terrible goof, but, it turns out, not much more of a goof than the rest of the film.

TITAN A.E.

Titan A.E. isn't really worth discussing, as the plotting is some half-baked sci-fi nonsense about earthlings finding a new world after the old one is destroyed, with a series of interchangeable characters, and one, a mole-like character named Goon, that is the most monstrously unfunny being of his kind since Jar Jar Binks. But it isn't bad, and it features a surprisingly bouncy score. Plus, some of the animated effects - especially the earth's destruction, the sequence with the exploding hydrogen trees, and the finale set amidst huge ice crystals - are truly out-of-this-world. It's completely inoffensive and sometimes downright enjoyable, and every second of its hackneyed sci-fi formula is preferable to the hackneyed epic formula of *The Patriot*.