

'The Rover:' edgy, film noir western in dystopia



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The Rover

Rating:

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“The Rover” may be a crime drama set in the future, but director/co-writer David Michôd has taken great pains to avoid making this Aussie indie a commercial genre picture. In fact, despite very definite film noir references, “The Rover” has its feet planted firmly in that least commercial of genres, the western. Set in Australia in the foreseeable future, “ten years after the collapse,” “The Rover” follows one man’s bloody odyssey to get his stolen car back

from thieves.

This could have been another “Mad Max,” but Michôd isn’t interested in either heroes or colorful villains. In fact, he provides neither. As “Eric,” the chameleon-like Guy Pearce manages to imbue an implacable and ruthless character with humanity and nuance. Much like John Wayne in John Ford’s classic western “The Searchers,” Eric is relentless in his quest. We aren’t told why the car means so much to him—like Rosebud in “Citizen Kane,” that ends up being the point of the movie—but it’s clearly more than mere transportation. Although he

looks like an everyman in need of a shave, Pearce stalks the sunbaked Australian outback with a determination The Terminator would envy.

The bad guys, led by American actor Scoot McNairy (“Argo,” “12 Years a Slave”), are not a terrifying band of barbarian bikers with Mohawks, but some not terribly bright stiff trying to steal the living they can’t make. In fact, their introductory scene, battered and bloodied on the run, makes them at least slightly sympathetic.

Fate drops a sidekick in Eric’s lap—Rey (Robert Pattinson), the dimwitted brother of one of Eric’s prey, who was left for dead after a botched robbery. It may be time to get over Pattinson’s long, lucrative and artistically unfortunate association with the much-reviled “Twilight” movie franchise. Dirty, unshaven, with gray teeth, the Twihard icon anything but sparkles in the scorching sun of the outback here. What he does is sparkle artistically in a performance where the actor absolutely eschews glamour in favor of creating a character who’s both tragic and comic—a man-child with a gun.

The relationship between the two is the stuff of westerns, as is much of this grim, edgy, uncompromising movie. A meditation by Pearce on the spiritual price of taking a life could have come right out of Clint Eastwood’s “Unforgiven.” Decent people usually want to believe that you’re supposed to lose something when you kill someone. Perhaps ironically, Pearce’s Eric seems to be the only character in the movie who gets that.

We aren’t told what “the collapse” was. The movie implies it was economic rather than the clichéd nuclear Armageddon so often responsible for these situations in movies. The production notes, which the casual viewer doesn’t get to read, are redolent with references to the geo-political subtext of the movie and that’s just delusions of grandeur. The story required a blighted background, and we have one. Whatever happened, society has been hopelessly diminished, if not altogether broken down, and human life as a commodity is cheaper than ever. The characters really aren’t up to the challenge. The people Eric encounters along the way are for the most part doomed, and sudden death has become a part of their normalcy. You almost have to think back to “Apocalypse Now” to find another movie that’s as much a death trip at its core.

Whatever lapses in logic bedevil “The Rover” (and there are a number), clichés are not a problem. A dazzling auto stunt is shown early on, through the window of a karaoke bar, unseen

and unheard by Guy Pearce, whose back is turned. The violence which punctuates the movie is never titillating, never thrilling, although it is at times startling. The vast landscape is as much a character in its own right as it is a backdrop, but there is none of the majesty one equates with John Ford westerns. The desert here is bleak and foreboding, and absolutely unbeautiful.

We might have wished this movie tighter (even at a mere hour and forty minutes it feels a little long), we might have wished it more focused and we might have wished it made its point a little more clearly. Drama has been said to be about one main character who really, really wants something, will do virtually anything to get it, and either gets it or doesn't. This movie ends up being a shatteringly simple movie about one man's quest, and it's greatest artistic success is that when you find out why he was willing to do anything to achieve his goal, you may have to re-evaluate everything that led up to it.

“ *"The Rover" is now playing at The Regal Cinemas Crossgates Stadium 18 & IMAX and The Spectrum 7 on Delaware Avenue in Albany.*