Movie Review: 'No Country for Old Men'

by David_Elliott

"No Country for Old Men," the new startler from Joel and Ethan Coen, deals an odd hand confidently. The Texas crime story leads with aces high, but dips for some low and wild cards.

'NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN' - Josh Brolin plays Llewelyn Moss in 'No Country for Old Men.' CNS Photo courtesy of Richard Foreman. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) Adapting Cormac McCarthy's harsh novel, the Coens put a skull right on the card table. That is Javier Bardem as Anton Chigurh, whose brown crown of hair, above a coldly staring face, signals a brutal weirdness. He's a psychopath who likes to taunt victims, and he smiles about going to hell.

Deadpan in a deadly way, Chigurh is poisonously funny due to Bardem's charisma and the unblinking return gaze and hold-that-thought rhythms of the Coens. Chigurh is improbably hired by corporate drug dealers, after a West Texas desert gun-down leaves 'Nam veteran and hunter Llewelyn Moss (Josh Brolin) with a case of $2

million, once he stumbles on the carnage.

Packing off his sweetly scattered wife (Kelly Macdonald) to her dying but chirpy mom (more Coen humor), Moss plays catch-me with Chigurh. It's macho amateur vs. nihilistic pro, cocky improviser vs. Lecter loon. Soberly forlorn Sheriff Ed Tom Bell (Tommy Lee Jones), who has seen far too much for way too long, dovetails among them, often a bit late.

In a great year, Jones almost matches his peerless work in "In the Valley of Elah." You wouldn't want anyone but the grizzled Texan to play Bell. The Coenized McCarthy dialogue is a tray of salty nuts, and Jones chews 'em real good. "It's a mess, ain't it, sheriff?" notes his young deputy, and Bell answers, "If it ain't, it will do till the mess gets here."

Bodies of the guilty or luckless pile up. As a glib hit man, Woody Harrelson almost waltzes into the action. True to the gawking urge that goes back to "Blood Simple" (1984), the Coens snuggle into wounds, and Moss and Chigurh each plays doctor to himself.

The Coens love a noir spiral cascading down (Moss to wife: "Baby, things happen. I can't take 'em back"). This has the usual Coen precision, shot with the trigger eye of photographer Roger Deakins. A couple of his motels rival that in "Psycho."

The movie echoes less Hitchcock than Sam Peckinpah's border spree "The Getaway" (1972), which was also footnoted by Roger Donaldson's strong remake in '94. The Coens do their own spin on torpid Mexicans, motel trashies, mean rubes, a sassy codger true to Slim Pickens in '72. But there isn't the sex heat, and the Coens lay on some dotty decals like the mariachi band that finds a bleeding Moss, who dripped right across the border.

They also indulge in some obscurity, like Chigurh seen in a shadow space already sealed by police tape, then seemingly gone with his bulk up an air vent. Though the mournful Bell called him a ghost, we know that big body bleeds. There is a long shotgun showdown that somehow doesn't wake up a town, and the story's finish dangles McCarthy's cattle brand of brooding Western despair.

The Coens dice our nerves and make us enjoy their skill (look how they relish Chigurh's hair and ugly weapon). They do social comedy with loners who signify the lower depths, but they don't really do tragedy.

When Jones stands before a dying old pal (Barry Corbin) and laments the absence of God, it seems like another Coen punch line. Their "Fargo" worked more as a comedy of violence than as a mine shaft of the Minnesota soul.

The Coens can lasso any sort of wildness, can romp with it, yet like "Blood Simple," this is a ropey stretch for the dark heart of Texas. Also one hell of a trip.

A Miramax Films release. Directors, writers: Joel and Ethan Coen. Cast: Tommy Lee Jones, Javier Bardem, Josh Brolin, Woody Harrelson, Kelly Macdonald, Tess Harper, Barry Corbin. Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes. Rated R. 3 stars.

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