

Hollywood, Etc.: 'No Country for Old Men' ready for home viewing

by David L. Coddon

If you look hard enough, you can probably still find "No Country for Old Men," recently crowned best picture of the year by the Oscar gods, on the big screen. That's still the best way to appreciate the Coen brothers' lyrical but brutal film, especially if you haven't yet seen it: larger than life, with its sweeping West Texas desolation and iconic characters overcoming you in the darkness.

TIME TO LEAVE - Josh Brolin takes the money and runs in 'No Country for Old Men,' the Oscar winner now out on DVD. CNS Photo courtesy of Richard Foreman. Or you can now rent (or buy, if you're a gambler) the DVD of "No Country for Old Men," in stores.

Let's say you haven't seen "No Country." Given the choice, is there any possible reason to watch it for the first time in DVD (or Blu-Ray) format?

Sure, if the violence - which is bloody and recurrent throughout the Coens' adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's novel - is easier for you to take on a smaller scale. Or if the film's harrowing moments (and it has them in spades) are better endured in the safety of your living room, with the remote in your hand and one finger on the PAUSE button.

Or if you're into bonus features. The "No Country for Old Men" DVD includes three of them: an interview-studded documentary about the making of the film; on-camera testimony from the cast and crew about the joy of working with Joel and Ethan Coen; and a character-study segment titled "Diary of a Country Sheriff."

One point that comes across even more clearly than in the feature film, thanks to the DVD's features, is that "No Country for Old Men" is, philosophically, more about Tommy Lee Jones' character, Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, than about Javier Bardem's Oscar-winning killer, Anton Chigurh, or Josh Brolin's cowboy, Llewelyn Moss. Bell, able but aging and unable to stop the spree of a Frankenstein's-monster of a murderer, is the conscience and decency of the film. Even if Jones' screen time feels like less than that of either Bardem's or Brolin's.

"This movie is about time going by and things changing," one of the Coens says in the "Diary" featurette. No one internalizes this more strongly - or sadly - than Sheriff Bell, whose wistful words open the film (in a voice-over) and close it (as he recounts a dream).

The usually laconic - and almost always testy - Jones proffers the most amusing description of "No Country for Old Men" in the making-of feature: He calls it a "horror comedy chase."

From the directors, we are reminded that the landscape of the Southwest - so arid and bleak, yet full of life as well as of death - is a major character in itself in "No Country." Though so much of the cat-and-mouse between Chigurh and Brolin (and Bell, too) has a claustrophobic feel about it, this is a movie that required sweep - wide-open spaces that yet were not wide open enough to hide in.

Only the Coen brothers would go into detail about how the film's early massacre aftermath scene was assembled, how they took into account the effects of scorching sun and wind and the passing of grim hours upon both human and canine carcasses.

As for Bardem's much-discussed, much-ridiculed Dorothy Hamill haircut, to the Coens, it was "fantastic."

The same really can't be said about "No Country for Old Men," which may have been the best in a weak field of best picture contenders, and certainly isn't the Coen brothers' finest work. I, for one, prefer "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" and "Fargo," and probably even "The Big Lebowski" and "Barton Fink."

"No Country's" aforementioned intermingling of brutality and lyricism is far from seamless, and the ending - as many have complained - is a muddle. But it's hard to quibble with its soul, which is as vivid, and as bipolar, as morning and midnight.

Don't watch this one at midnight, even on DVD, unless you plan on being up until morning.

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