

Movie Review: 'Redbelt'

by Peter Rowe

Sometimes it seems David Mamet wants to hit audiences with dialogue until their noses bleed down to their waists. That might explain why the writer-director's latest film is titled "Redbelt." It's a martial-arts film composed of battling banter - a jujitsu tale centered on verbal wrestling.

'REDBELT' - Chiwetel Ejiofor lets his fists do the talking to two tough guys in David Mamet's action film 'Redbelt.' CNS Photo courtesy of Lorey Sebastian. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) The characters don't talk so much as deliver wordy wallops. The protagonist, Mike Terry (Chiwetel Ejiofor), the trainer at a struggling Los Angeles martial-arts studio, toughens his students through repetitive phrases that echo the Taiko drumming of the soundtrack: "Control your emotions! Control your emotions! Breathe! Breathe! Wax on, wax off!" OK, scratch the last part, but you get the idea.

This beat-by-beat, rat-a-tat approach is well known to those who have ever seen Mamet's "Glengarry Glen Ross," "House of Games," or played pingpong with Forrest Gump when he's angry. In "Redbelt," unfortunately, what's missing is the melody over the rhythm. This ambitious yet scattered film hits a series of notes, lays down underlying themes, but doesn't transform into anything hummable.

There isn't even any humor. About the funniest thing in "Redbelt" is Terry's comment that martial arts belts aren't good for much except "to keep up your pants."

This follows an unfortunate trend in Mamet's films, which, like "The Spanish Prisoner" (a bland treatise on MacGuffin plot devices), increasingly resemble aesthetic exercises. In his book "On Directing Film," Mamet explains his view of pure story architecture, where every action has a clear motivation, every scene a causal link. He reduces storytelling to a hydraulic press that squeezes out fun in favor of function.

"Redbelt" plays this out, with a plot transparently designed to put Terry's jujitsu teachings to the test. Some of it has a neat symmetry: If Terry tells his students, "There's always an escape!", expect him later to get stuck in a headlock (both literal and litigious). Terry also talks about the difference between competition and winning - the ego vs. the soul - and the ending crystallizes this idea in a fight scene that occurs not in an arena, but beside one.

Getting there is another story. Talk about plot! "Redbelt" shoe-horns enough characters for a miniseries into 99 minutes of random events. As Terry is training a noble policeman (Max Martin) in the finer points of jujitsu, a distraught lawyer (Emily Mortimer) enters the studio and accidentally shatters the studio's window. Terry has no money to pay for its replacement until he defends a self-destructive actor (Tim Allen) during a bar fight and is then hired as the action choreographer for a film about the Iraq war.

This leads Terry's wife (Alice Braga) to form a clothing-design business with the actor's wife (Mamet's wife, Rebecca Pidgeon, who apparently signed a pre-nup requiring him to cast her in all his films). But Braga is conned out of \$30,000 and must pay back a loan shark (David Paymer). This somehow happens because Terry pawns a stolen Rolex. Don't ask.

Like some sort of Mamet reunion, "House of Games" alums Joe Mantegna and Ricky Jay show up to play fast-talking con men. Mantegna's wife is played by Jennifer Grey ("Dirty Dancing"), sadly put into a corner without dialogue or purpose. Oh yeah, at some point Terry helps the lawyer (Mortimer) overcome a rape trauma, so she represents him in an intellectual-property suit that is derailed by a personal betrayal.

The only thing Terry can do to clean up the whole mess is compete for cash in an ultimate-fighting match

involving the biggest jujitsu masters from Japan and Brazil. As a friend pointed out to me, even though the story was inspired by Mamet's real-life fascination with Brazilian jujitsu (he trains with Renato Magno in Santa Monica, Calif.), for some reason all of the Brazilian characters (including one played by heartthrob Rodrigo Santoro) are big, bossa-nova-style jerks.

But then, most of the characters in David Mamet's films are jerks. If that's OK with you, "Redbelt" holds up as a modest diversion. Bring your own belt for your pants.

"Redbelt." Running time: 1 hour, 39 minutes. Rated: R. 2 1/2 stars.

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