3:10 to Yuma: a new old Western

Hiram Lee
1 October 2007

Directed by James Mangold, screenplay by Halsted Welles, Michael Brandt and Derek Haas

3:10 to Yuma is the latest film from director James Mangold (*Walk The Line, Cop Land*) and a remake of the 1957 film of the same name directed by longtime Hollywood stalwart Delmer Daves. Apart from the addition of some action sequences and a dramatic change to the ending, Mangold's film closely follows Daves's original work. Halsted Welles, who wrote the screenplay for Daves's film, receives a writer's credit on the new work as well.

Mangold's film is not without its charms. It features a talented cast, with Christian Bale, Russell Crowe, Peter Fonda, Ben Foster and Gretchen Mol all taking part. Unfortunately, the film as a whole is something of a disappointment and is mostly unable to live up to the potential of its story and cast.

3:10 to Yuma, set in late nineteenth-century Arizona, tells the story of Dan Evans (Christian Bale), a rancher struggling to make ends meet. Glen Hollander (Lennie Loftin), who owns the land the Evans family lives on, wants to sell it to the expanding railroad. He cuts off the flow of water to the property with dams, hoping to force the family off.

Evans has a wife and two sons, one of whom despises him for his inability to conquer the obstacles the family continually faces. When a gang of outlaws burn down Evans's barn one evening and steal all of his cattle, he and his sons, unable to withstand another blow, must set out to find them. The following day they stumble upon the gang, led by notorious outlaw Ben Wade (Russell Crowe), as the gang is robbing a stagecoach.

When the outlaws discover that Evans and his sons have witnessed the robbery, Wade confronts the rancher. Seeing that Evans only wants his property back, and with the money from the stagecoach now in his possession, Wade agrees to return the cattle to him. He then forces Evans to hand over his horses so the rancher won't be able to alert the authorities to the robbery until the gang is long gone.

Satisfied with the success of the stagecoach robbery, the Wade gang goes to the town of Bisbee where they report their own robbery to authorities as a diversion to get the law out of town while the gang remains there. After a celebratory drink or two, the outlaws soon take leave of their boss with plans to rendezvous across the border in Mexico.

Evans also slowly makes his way to Bisbee in the company of Byron McElroy (Peter Fonda), a bounty hunter who was wounded in the hold up of the stagecoach. When they arrive in Bisbee, Evans, at the end of his rope, goes in search of Hollander with a gun determined to find some kind of justice for his family. Instead of the land baron, he once again stumbles across Ben Wade, who has yet to leave town.

With Wade discovered, he is soon arrested and a posse is assembled to escort the outlaw to the aptly named town of Contention, where he will be placed on the 3:10 prison train to Yuma. Evans, with his family's financial misfortunes in mind, reluctantly decides to go along on the promise that he will be paid $200 for his trouble.

On the way to Yuma, the men will stop at Evans's home to rest and send out a diversion of their own to confuse Wade's gang whose members, having learned of the fate of their boss, are now on the way to rescue him.

It's during the stay at the Evans ranch that the film offers up some of its best moments. Following a tense dinner in which Wade, the cool and collected villain, taunts the increasingly desperate Evans, the latter and his wife (played by Mol) get into a fight over Evans's decision to become involved with the transporting of the prisoner. They argue in whispers in a back room so their children and dinner guests won't hear. Evans pleads with his wife to understand. He can't carry on in

such dire straits. “I’m tired of watching my boys go hungry,” he says.

In these scenes Bale is able to contribute something genuine. He’s a serious actor. One hopes he doesn’t spend too many years in the newly resurrected and restrictive *Batman* film franchise.

The taunting of Evans by Wade, begun even before the dinner, continues throughout these sequences. Certain exchanges stay with the viewer. Wade says to Evans regarding his decision to escort him to Yuma, “You can change your mind, Dan. No one will think less of you.” Evans responds, “No one *can* think less of me.” When Evans tells Wade he makes an honest living, Wade shoots back, “It might be honest, but I don’t think it’s much of a living.”

In moments like these, the director, who has a fondness for the allegorical tales of classic Westerns, presumably hopes the spectator will draw some parallels between the situation facing Evans and that which millions of people confront today. But the moments are not really developed.

When the group escorting the prisoner finally reaches Contention after a number of violent encounters in which Wade has repeatedly tried to escape, they are demoralized and expecting a battle with the outlaw gang that will outnumber them. A hotel room is secured in which Evans will hold Wade prisoner until the 3:10 train arrives.

The scenes in the hotel room were the most memorable feature in Daves’s original film. They were tense and claustrophobic scenes in which the psychological and moral battle between Evans (played by Van Heflin) and Wade (Glenn Ford) came to a head. One felt the pressure Evans was under from all sides. He was tortured by Wade’s offers of money and a way to avoid a fight with his gang. Glenn Ford’s Wade was alarmingly confident and seductive. Heflin’s Evans seems weaker than Bale’s, and more likely to waver.

The hotel sequence in the new film does not carry the same weight as the original. Indeed, as the film moves forward there is less and less that moves the viewer. The earlier, memorable scenes give way to action sequences which are not terribly exciting and the focus shifts more and more to the relationship between Evans and his estranged son—a narrow exploration into some very banal territory, as it turns out.

Mangold’s award-winning *Walk The Line* suffered from similar problems. In that film, a biopic about country music icon Johnny Cash, the focus was placed on Cash’s battles with substance abuse while there was little or no mention of his wider interests or consideration of the highly contradictory period in which he worked, along with slight insight into his music. The story of a very fascinating and unique musical talent was reduced to one of those supposedly universal stories about a man’s battle with his “personal demons.”

In *3:10 to Yuma*, Evans’s relationship with his son, faltering under intense financial pressures, is similarly reduced to a kind of truism: A man needs to be a man for his son, or, perhaps, a son needs to be able to look up to his father.

Mangold’s *3:10 to Yuma* approaches its finale, like Daves’s film, with Evans left alone to walk Wade through the town of Contention which is now occupied by Wade’s gang. Wade’s right hand man Charlie has offered $200 dollars to anyone who will shoot his boss’s captor. Knowing the dangers, Evans, mostly to make an example for his son, faces the gang and attempts to make it to the train with his prisoner.

The ending, which won’t be revealed here, is quite different from Daves’s film. But it must be said that neither of the two endings are particularly satisfying. Both have something artificial about them. Both seem to tie up certain loose ends too quickly and conveniently. It’s a disappointing turn in either case, with both films losing their way.

James Mangold’s movies up to this point—*Girl, Interrupted; Cop Land; Walk The Line;* and now *3:10 to Yuma*—are all works that seem to want to say something, but too often stop short of saying it.