

Hell or High Water: A remarkable snapshot

Charles Bogle
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Scottish director David Mackenzie's ninth feature film, *Hell or High Water*, a Western-influenced, "buddy"-chase movie with a social conscience and superb performances, has been highly praised.

This reviewer endorses the praise with a minor but necessary qualification. The director's decision to follow a little too closely the "buddy"-chase plot pattern diminishes *Hell and High Water's* most vital feature: a critical look at American finance capitalism's brutal machinations.

Unemployed Toby Howard (Chris Pine) and his brother Tanner (Ben Foster), who has spent the last 10 years in prison, go on a bank robbery spree in West Texas to meet overdue alimony payments to Toby's divorced wife Debbie (Marin Ireland). The aim is to prevent foreclosure of their now-deceased mother's property by the very same chain of banks.

The fact that oil has been discovered on the property—a fact that informed the bank's decision to sell their mother a mortgage she could not repay—is not lost on Toby. He calculates that if he pays off the mortgage he can then put the property in the names of his two sons, Justin (John-Paul Howard) and Randy (Christopher W. Garcia), and guarantee them a better life than he and his brother have had.

The brothers' robberies draw the attention of Sheriff Marcus Hamilton (Jeff Bridges) and his deputy, Alberto Parker (Gil Birmingham). After obtaining evidence from not only the banks in question, but the diners and single casino in the area as well (Toby and Tanner make additional money by gambling with the stolen money), the sheriff comes to the conclusion that Toby is the smart, thoughtful brother, while Tanner is the wild one who handles the dirty, dangerous side of their "business."

This notion is proven correct when the brothers hit a larger bank and Tanner kills two people during his and Toby's escape. Sheriff Hamilton and his deputy follow

the brothers into the West Texas desert where various dramas unfold, eventually leading to a somewhat disappointing coda.

While *Hell or High Water* is a variation of the Western genre, it does extend the reach of such movies—and almost all American movies of the few decades—by satirizing religion and "political correctness," and by offering glimpses of the consequences of the American finance oligarchy's cupidity.

Taylor Sheridan's screenplay contains a number of such glimpses, e.g., the sequence during which Sheriff Hamilton spots the bank manager and he says to his partner, "That looks like a man who could foreclose on a house." During a brief history of how the American Indians were robbed of their property, Alberto tells the sheriff, "Now, it's the banks who are doing the robbing." Later in the movie, Toby explains why he robbed banks: "I've been poor my whole life. It's like a disease passed on from one generation to the next. But not my boys."

Cinematographer Giles Nuttgen (*Fundamentals of Caring*, *Water*) paints an even sadder portrait of the consequences of American financial capitalism's consequences by presenting a sun-colored Texas landscape littered with "In-Debt?" billboards, abandoned, dilapidated homes and disintegrating small towns.

The performances are uniformly inspired. Jeff Bridges' Marcus Hamilton is a deceptively complex man itching to retire: he aims racially charged jokes at his American Indian deputy, but he becomes a cold-blooded predator when he hunts down his deputy's killer. He spends a great deal of his time apparently doing nothing in particular, yet he invariably provides a matter-of-fact, spot-on assessment of Toby and Tanner's next move.

Ben Foster is excellent in the role of the cynical,

fearless Tanner Howard. He confronts a much larger Comanche Indian (uncredited) during a poker game and carloads of cops chasing him toward the movie's end with the same mixture of inevitability and downright pleasure.

Chris Pine as Toby Howard is the movie's biggest acting surprise, considering his resumé of predictably unexciting action movies and *Star Trek* iterations (unfortunately, his next four movies are of this variety). His Toby can exhibit an uncommon sensitivity and selflessness but is also capable of frightening bursts of anger. Pine makes these seemingly disparate traits part of a whole cloth.

Like other movies of its type, *Hell or High Water* doesn't feature many women characters. But even though their roles are small, three women make a strong impression. Dale Dickey (*Winter's Bone*, *Ain't it Nowhere*), an extremely hardworking and underappreciated actor, brings a high degree of credibility to her role as bank employee Elsie (the first bank hit by Toby and Tanner), who remains unflappable when the brothers, dressed in dark hoodies and toting guns, threaten her.

Eighty-eight-year-old Margaret Bowman's role as a waitress in the T-Bone Diner lasts no longer than a minute or two. But during that time, Ms. Bowman delivers a perfect rendering of a waitress in West Texas (or any diner or factory bar) who doesn't have time to chat or put up with nonsense in general.

Debrianna Mansini brings both tenderness and desperation to her role as a Vernon Diner waitress.

In an interview with online publication *Collier*, David Mackenzie stated that while he is "an outsider from Scotland" who's spent only "a little bit of time in the West before [making the movie], "I feel like [the movie's] a little snapshot of a nation."

Mackenzie has indeed delivered a remarkable snapshot of the economic and social conditions blighting present-day America. But toward the end of the movie, the Western buddy movie plot forces *Hell or High Water's* most important theme into the background.

To the director's credit, *Hell or High Water's* obligatory chase scene doesn't feature bodies exploding through the air or other computer-generated special effects. There are no heroic deaths—in an interview with the *Guardian*, Mackenzie stated

emphatically, "I can't f----- bear superheroes, so I won't be doing one of those [movies]." In fact, the killings that do occur are shot in such a realistic, "objective" manner as to appear to be undermining cliché-ridden chase scenes, which is exactly the point.

But because the chase scene is placed toward the movie's end (where else would a director place a chase scene in a "buddy" movie?), the critical look at America's economic and social conditions is forced into the background. Even the coda—a final meeting between the sheriff and Toby—fails to bring together the earlier verbal and visual references to America's collapsing social conditions with a larger understanding of the source of these conditions.

Nonetheless, David Mackenzie's new movie is informed by a high degree of empathy for his characters' plight, which is rarely found in present-day filmmaking. A deeper, historically driven portrait of contemporary America has yet to find its way into filmmaking, but *Hell or High Water* has taken a welcome step.



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