

'The Sisters Brothers' makes an impression with well-drawn characters

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: ««« out of «««««

Running Time: 121 minutes

Westerns are surely one of the biggest genre staples in cinema (certainly in this part of the world). There have been thousands upon thousands of tales of frontiersmen moving across the plains, fighting for everything from a slice of land and place to prosper, to revenge. That means there's very little that hasn't been seen before.

The Sisters Brothers attempts a different, more arthouse approach at the genre, taking the form of a character study and subverting some of the expectations of the Western formula.

Set during the Gold Rush of the 1850s, the two leads are a pair of brutal, sharpshooter assassins and siblings, Eli Sisters (John C. Reilly) and Charlie (Joaquin Phoenix) who work for a wealthy commodore (Rutger Hauer).

When their employer tells them to hunt down chemist/gold prospector Hermann Warm (Riz Ahmed), Charlie is only too happy to oblige. With another bounty hunter named John Morris (Jake Gyllenhaal) in pursuit, the pair race off through Oregon and California, firing on anyone who gets in their way.

However, older brother Eli begins to have doubts about the motivations of their boss and the

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assignment itself, bickering with his brother as they encounter their target.

While this movie may be the first English-language feature from French director Jacques Audiard (*Dheepan*), it still has a very low-key, European arthouse feel.

The action is brief and brutal, but not depicted as a typical Hollywood shoot-out. It’s almost as if the filmmaker quickly establishes that the leads are expert gunslingers and so the physical conflicts are presented in a quick and matter-of-fact manner. Instead, there is much more attention paid to small minutia and unusual character traits.

Viewers should also be prepared to see a few things never witnessed before in a Western (including the horrific events that can befall a person while sleeping outdoors in the wild).

Thankfully, the director has an excellent cast to help him out. All of the actors involved are remarkable and the characters distinctive.

Morris makes for an interesting, cultured bounty hunter, while the sharp chemist has an interesting role as a thinker who must convince his chasers it would be easier and more profitable to help him with his formula rather than murder him for the bounty.

The relationship between the siblings is also interesting and detailed. Charlie is a simple brute ready to continue as a hired gun until his own demise. However, older brother Eli is a standout, seemingly obligated to help his deeply troubled sibling while struggling to contain growing concerns for their future.

It’s great to see Reilly get a lead role and he is extremely enjoyable to watch. As mentioned, there are several layers present to this hit man. He’s far more resigned and communicates something of a tortured soul. The actor’s comic chops are expectedly put to great use, and he occasionally shows an unexpected open-mindedness. This involves sampling world cuisine and marveling at the mechanizations of a flushable toilet.

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And there's an extremely funny running gag involving Eli awkwardly teaching himself how to brush his own teeth and trying to connect with others through the process. The brothers wouldn't be palatable at all without these amusingly unique comedic moments.

If you come into the movie expecting to see traditional gunfights and Western tropes, you will be disappointed by what you see. This film does not take a straightforward path or go where many will anticipate.

However, those willing to accept a subdued approach, including a focus primarily on characters instead of action may find enjoyment in the events depicted. Thanks to a great cast, well-drawn characters and unusual approach, *The Sisters Brothers* manages to stand apart from others of its ilk and make an impression.

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