

'Civil War' may bend some viewers out of shape

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
Friday, 12 April 2024 00:00



Rating: ««««

out of «««««

Running Time:
109 minutes

This feature film from A24 opens exclusively in theaters on Friday, April 12.

As a critic, it's rare to see a movie that gets an intense reception or reaction from those seated immediately around them. But over the course of the new film *Civil War*, that's exactly what this reviewer experienced. There was a great deal of squirming and a variety of strong reactions to the events being depicted on the screen. In fact, I feel like I was sandwiched between someone who disliked the film intensely and another who was so engaged they were liberally fidgeting their legs and muttering at the screen during tense moments. It seems the title is bound to be just as polarizing to regular viewers.

The story is set in the near future where the President of the United States (Nick Offerman) is a dictator. A Second Civil War has erupted with several factions fighting against the authoritarian leader. As the fracas continues, forces from so-called western allied states California and Texas

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close in on Washington, D.C., readying to take the capital and control of the country.

New York-based war photojournalist Lee (Kirsten Dunst) and journalist Joel (Wagner Moura) set a plan to drive along back roads and reach the White House before the president is ousted, all in the hopes of securing a final interview with him. They are joined in their dangerous journey by young, aspiring photographer Jessie (Cailee Spaeny) and elderly Sammy (Stephen McKinley Henderson), a renowned journalist and mentor to Lee and Joel.

This film isn't about what brought on the dictatorship or conflict, or even the mantas of these military groups. Instead, it is about the members of the press and their experiences while traveling through warzones. There are many chilling moments as the protagonists find themselves under fire with soldiers from both sides. The violent acts being committed are truly horrifying and made all the more unsettling because of the familiar American backdrops featured in the film.

Perhaps the most harrowing bit involves a loyalist soldier (Jesse Plemons) stopping and grilling the press members at gunpoint about their backgrounds with the intent of executing them if he doesn't like the answer.

Additionally, the movie makes a note of capturing photos of war, with a few images featuring the Western Forces soldiers grinning at the camera over individuals whom they have shot dead. In the end, it doesn't matter who is doing the slaughtering, all the pics send chills down the spine.

Despite being a grim war movie, the photography is striking throughout and bizarrely impressive. This is especially true when the characters sit back and watch rockets and gunfire light up the night sky. And while there is a musical score that pops up here and there, many of the battles feature no music and are broken up by still shot photographs of the action. With the exception of one significant moment at the climax of the picture (which is less-than-subtle) the unique approach taken for covering these moments is effective in authentically conveying their brutality.

Personally, the film may have benefitted from an even deeper examination of the motivations behind the two photographers. At least Dunst does make a strong impression as Lee and viewers do get a clear sense of how disillusioned and traumatized the character has become

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covering civil conflicts worldwide. She openly questions why her images have been completely ignored by her own citizens, who are now engaging in the same behavior. This a compelling idea well communicated by the performer throughout.

The Joel and Jessie characters have a brief but interesting exchange about their feelings of terror and excitement while being in the middle of battle. And truth be told, both photographers seem determined to remain detached in order to get their perfect shot even when their subjects are suffering. This viewer wanted to know more about their personal philosophy on their profession and where their obsession may have derived from, but the story doesn't give them any time to elaborate.

Despite a few of the characters needing extra fleshing out, this movie serves as a jarring and sharp warning against extremist policies and the dehumanization that can occur during wartime. *Civil War* is a tough watch that will bend some viewers out of shape, but it does land several blows and makes a long-lasting impression.

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