

“MACHETE” (Film Review)

Written by Michael Gingold

Friday, 03 September 2010 10:48



I try not to let the circumstances under which I see movies affect my reviews of them, but I must say that having viewed Robert Rodriguez’s MACHETE in a screening room, it’s hard not to imagine that catching it in a packed house of enthusiastic fans would have enhanced the experience. Feel free to add a half-skull to the rating below if you plan to see it at a crowded late-night theatrical showing this weekend, perhaps enhanced by a Corona or tequila or two.

On the other hand, it is entirely possible to judge a movie on its own merits *sans* a riled-up audience; I believe I even let out a whoop or two in that screening room during MACHETE’s knockout opening sequence. It introduces us to Mexican lawman Machete Cortez (Danny Trejo) as he infiltrates a drug den in a rundown rural town to rescue a kidnapping victim (a hot, naked kidnapping victim, of course). The result is a lengthy bout of imaginative, enthusiastically staged bloodshed that delivers on the promise of the MACHETE trailer that co-director (with Ethan Maniquis) and co-scripter (with his brother Alvaro) Rodriguez created for GRINDHOUSE. But what follows demonstrates that it’s a lot tougher to keep up that low-rent energy for the length of a feature than it is in the short form.



Machete winds up almost, but not quite, killed by drug lord Torrez (Steven Seagal, who can’t act in Spanish either), who does dispatch our hero’s wife and child. Three years later, Machete is scrounging for day-labor work in Rodriguez’s home base of Austin, TX, where he’s observed by immigration agent Sartana (Jessica Alba) shortly before he’s approached by Booth (Jeff Fahey), who learns his rates for lawn care, house work and septic before offering him significantly more cash to carry out a hit. The target is Senator McLaughlin (Robert De Niro), who’s running for re-election on a platform of zero tolerance for immigrants (among other things, he advocates for

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the construction of an electrified fence along the border). McLaughlin also likes to deal with the situation a little more directly by going on human hunts with nasty good-ol'-boy militia leader Von (Don Johnson).

It soon turns out that Booth isn't exactly a man of his word, Torrez winds up involved in the action again...and that's an awful lot of villains to cram into one exploitation script. (Not to mention at least two significant secondary baddies: a sniper played by a welcome Shea Whigham from *SPLINTER*, and a killer-for-hire with his own infomercial and 1-800 number, portrayed by the equally welcome Tom Savini.) Along the way, Machete hooks up with Sartana and starts converting her to his side, and also gets involved with Luz (Michelle Rodriguez), an underground revolutionary leader who operates out of a taco truck. What we have here, to quote Joe Bob Briggs, is a little too much plot getting in the way of the story, and what should have been a lean and mean under-90-minute actionfest gets distended to 105 via a lot of narrative huggermugger and speechifying about the plight of undocumented Mexicans—as if the audience won't be on Machete's side right from the start.

That's due to the authority and been-through-it-all tough-guy attitude Trejo brings to the role; it's great to see him take a feature-film lead after decades of supporting parts, and a shame when the overstuffed supporting ensemble sometimes crowds him offscreen, at one point for what feels like most of a reel. It would be hard to find someone more convincing as a man of action, and *MACHETE* sparks to life when he takes out the gangs of thugs sent to do him in. A hospital scene, in particular, ends with him making his getaway via a hilariously sick visual joke. Also amusing is the way Machete winds up coupling with every woman he meets, James Bond-style—though the actual sex is largely kept offscreen. The one major exception is his swimming-pool threesome with Booth's wife and daughter; the latter is played (*except* in that pool scene, where it appears a body double takes over) by Lindsay Lohan, who under her current atoning circumstances might now be regretting taking the part of a promiscuous, oft-drunk party girl.

Making the strongest impressions among the supporting cast are Fahey (if anyone's gonna get a Tarantino-style career boost from this film, it's him), Michelle Rodriguez and Cheech Marin, who appears late in the game as Machete's priest brother, who's got a few secrets hidden in the back of his church. Electra and Elise Avellan, *GRINDHOUSE*'s Crazy Babysitter Twins, also turn up as sexy nurses, and everybody winds up converging for a big climactic shootout. After the solid action that has preceded it, though, this setpiece is a bit of a letdown; it's more chaotic than exciting, and Machete's final dustup with Torrez ends with a whimper instead of a bang. *MACHETE* needed a sharper blade in the editing room, and while it delivers the trashy, gory goods better than something like *THE EXPENDABLES*, it winds up being a little less than the sum of those parts—and yet another case of a movie that doesn't quite live up to the promise of its trailer.

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