

“JONAH HEX” (Film Review)

Written by Michael Gingold
Thursday, 17 June 2010 22:28



Don't believe all those reports you may have heard that JONAH HEX runs only 82 minutes. This reviewer clocked it at just 79, and that includes eight minutes of end credits.

Consider that a moment: The actual movie only runs nine times longer than it takes to list the people who worked on it. Rarely has there seemed a greater disconnect between the amount of people, money and effort expended on a film and the product that resulted. JONAH HEX has the look and sound of an epic, but it sure doesn't play like one. It's less a feature than a 79-minute studio compromise, bearing the overwhelming feel of something pushed and pulled and cut and pasted by multiple hands with opposing goals, and then tossed out to theaters in as short a form as possible, the better to get more shows per day during the opening weekend before word of mouth gets around.



Based—very loosely, it's been said by those in the know—on the DC/Vertigo comic, JONAH HEX sees Josh Brolin fighting valiantly but vainly to lend gravitas to the movie in the title role. He's a Civil War veteran turned bounty hunter who bears severe physical and psychological scars from a confrontation with an evil former Confederate colonel named Quentin Turnbull (played with an evident lack of interest by John Malkovich). To avenge his son's death at Jonah's hands, Turnbull forced Jonah to watch as he burned down Jonah's house with his wife and son inside, then applied a branding iron to his face before almost killing him. The near-death experience has left Jonah with the ability to communicate with the deceased (though the rules, like much else in the movie, aren't entirely clear) along with melted flesh and a hole in his cheek, occasioning a macabre sight gag that was done better in PAN'S LABYRINTH.

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Now a tortured loner, Jonah rids the West of varmints for money, armed with an assortment of over-the-top weapons that he only seems to use once each (though in the case of the saddle-mounted Gatling guns, one imagines his horse finds that a relief). But when Turnbull, whom Jonah has thought died in another fire, turns out to be very much alive and blowing up trains and such to steal the parts needed to create a “superweapon,” Jonah is charged with stopping him by President Ulysses S. Grant himself, played briefly by Aidan Quinn. There are, in fact, a number of characters briefly played in JONAH HEX by actors who usually command more screen time; no doubt there’s more footage on the cutting-room floor of such co-stars as Michael Fassbender, Will Arnett, Michael Shannon, Wes Bentley, FRINGE’s Lance Reddick and an uncredited Jeffrey Dean Morgan. Meanwhile, Jonah’s love interest, tough-hooker-with-a-heart-of-gold Lilah, is played by a quite out-of-place Megan Fox, whose part also appears to have been reduced, but not enough.

JONAH HEX was scripted and originally set to be directed by Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor, the maniacs behind the CRANK movies, who departed the project over creative differences and whose berserk stylings might have at least given the incoherent proceedings a nutty charge. Their replacement at the helm was Jimmy Hayward, a former Pixar animator making his live-action feature debut (coincidentally opening the same day as TOY STORY 3, which finds LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE scripter Michael Arndt making the reverse trip far more successfully). Hayward in turn was reportedly supplanted in postproduction by I AM LEGEND director Francis Lawrence, who oversaw reshoots and other doctoring. But the Humpty Dumpty of a movie that has resulted seems to have been put back together without all the necessary pieces; the story doesn’t flow, people and ideas appear and disappear willy-nilly and the big action scenes are perfunctory and undercooked.

Along the way, a few promising themes get lost. There’s an element of Native American mysticism underpinning Jonah and his preternatural powers, but it’s not explored in enough depth that moments like his tranced-out vomiting up of a live crow result in anything other than unintended snickers. And while Turnbull’s activities, and his weapon of mass destruction, are clearly meant to echo current events (he’s even referred to as a “terrorist”), the metaphor never rises above halfhearted. It’s all very visually polished (cinematographer Mitchell Amundsen is one of the few people involved who can walk away from this mess with his head held high), but by the time the hero and villain’s final confrontation is being pointlessly punctuated by flashbacks to their earlier confrontation, even these 71 minutes have started to feel very, very long.



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