

Sicario: Day of the Soldado ends with a punch, but no challenge to original

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

Running Time: 122 minutes

Sicario is a tough act to follow. The 2015 production was one of my favorite films of that year, detailing an ugly, gray, unflinching and unflattering portrait of US operatives going above and beyond the law in order to cause chaos among Mexican drug cartels. This spin-off follows the most enigmatic and dangerous character from the previous film, setting him loose on a new assignment. The results are *Sicario: Day of the Soldado*. On its own, it's a well acted and decent thriller. However, it can't match the tension and uniqueness of the original.

After a terrorist attack on a Texas grocery store, the US government looks for someone to blame. When they discover that the perpetrators may have been smuggled over the border by drug cartels, officials decide that they want retribution... without being directly connected.

They assign agent Matt Graver (Josh Brolin) and Alejandro Gillick (Benicio del Toro) to come up with a mission that will cause mistrust in the criminal underworld. This involves kidnapping the daughter (Isabela Moner) of one drug lord. However, things get increasingly complicated after the operation goes sideways. It leaves Alejandro and the girl stranded in Mexico and Graver told to tie up loose ends and kill them both.

This movie features the identical screenwriter and many of the same onscreen performers, but with new faces behind the camera. The technicians are all very talented, attempting to recreate

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the feel of the original entry. Like the original, there are some impressive overhead shots of environments, along with a similarly unsettling score backing up the proceedings. And as always, del Toro is an undeniably entertaining actor to watch, thanks to his slow-burning long stares and low-key intensity.

However, there are problems. In the original, we saw the drug cartel crisis through the eyes of an idealistic young recruit. But with Alejandro as the new lead, the screenplay is forced into readapting him as a protagonist. As a result, the character has been considerably softened.

Originally, this was a man who would literally do anything (with some of his actions being downright shocking) in order to achieve his ultimate goal. Here, he suddenly develops a conscience and decides that despite his need for revenge, executing a teenager is unethical. It's an alteration that can't help but take away from the suspense and danger, as well as simplify the moral/ethical questions raised.

It's also unfortunate that the movie takes so long to really get going. There is a lot of set-up and several secondary characters that are introduced, resulting in a very slow build as the group's plan of action is developed. In fact, it is really only in the final third (as things go wrong and Alejandro is forced into taking desperate measures) that the story begins to truly grab viewers. These graphic scenes are tense and chillingly effective, but early sections aren't nearly as dynamic.

And sadly, by the close events aren't sufficiently resolved. This sequel is clearly the setup for an extended story to play out over future films. It may seem strange, but it feels as if the movie has only gotten halfway to its destination when the end credits roll. Perhaps they have something remarkable in store for the next chapter, but one can't help but feel a little let down that they have put off wrapping things up until another feature arrives.

On its own, *Sicario: Day of the Soldado* has a charismatic lead and some tense moments late in the film. Unfortunately, overall it just can't match the extraordinarily high bar that the original film achieves. You may get a few thrills here, but make sure you go in with lowered expectations.

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