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

Running Time: 141 minutes

A few years back, writer/director/producer Drew Goddard surprised many a critic with *The Cabin in the Woods*
, a freaky and fun deconstruction of the horror genre, jesting at its many tropes and why audiences enjoy them so much.

Bad Times at the El Royale certainly feels like the work of the same filmmaker, experimenting with narrative timelines and attempting to build suspense by revealing small pieces of information instead of directly spelling out what and why things are occurring.

All of the events unfold at El Royale motel near Lake Tahoe, situated on the border of California and Nevada (with a running state line visible through the middle of the establishment and each half of the locale decorated in a style representing a state).

This vacant locale suddenly meets with the arrival of several guests; aspiring singer Darlene Sweet (Cynthia Erivo), salesman Laramie Sullivan (Jon Hamm), man of the cloth Father Flynn (Jeff Bridges) and the curt, secretive Emily Summerspring (Dakota Johnson). As the arrivals are checked in by meek desk clerk Wade (Manny Jacinto), it becomes clear that all is not what it seems, either with these oddballs or the actual dwelling itself.

The movie asks viewers to accept a whole lot of coincidences as the characters are introduced into the same space. Yet the tale begins very well, emphasizing a sense of mystery and focusing on humorous interactions between the extremely unusual patrons.

As the timeline shifts to flashbacks and new information is revealed about each character and why they’re at the El Royale, there’s a real sense of wonder about how things are all going to be tied together.

Erivo serves as a likable, relatable entry point into the story, Bridges exudes charm as a priest with a dark secret and Hamm’s character earns laughs from some off-handed comments. There’s also a funny gag early on involving the desk clerk’s introduction to the motel and its amenities that gets repeated to each customer.

As mentioned, the first hour offers a great deal of enjoyment and interest. This is also a very good-looking movie, with the locale’s period production design really standing out.

Yet, while the movie features a game cast and does a commendable job of building suspense, as the jigsaw is put together, the final picture isn’t as striking. The film is strictly a redemption story (well, it is for a few of the characters), and all of the pieces don’t tie together so much as they provide simple obstacles. This approach ultimately makes all of the previous oddities on display seem all the more implausible.

A character named Billy Lee (Chris Hemsworth) eventually shows up for an extended third act.

The climax provides a bit of tension but involves a series of lengthy confessions and monologues and they eventually grow tiresome. After the credits roll, one will likely still have plenty of questions as to whether several red herrings and character histories were really all that necessary... particularly for a film with a lengthy running-time of over two hours and twenty minutes.

It probably isn’t fair to compare this title to the creator’s previous works, but the style displayed instantly reminded me of his earlier feature and this title ends up lacking in comparison.

Bad Times at the El Royale starts with great promise and has some fine individual performances and moments, but ultimately falls apart during its shaggy second half when viewers discover that the big reveal isn’t actually worth all the trouble.

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