

'The Ballad of Buster Scruggs' is well worth hearing

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
Friday, 16 November 2018 09:18



Rating: ««« out of «««««

Running Time: 132 minutes

This film premieres Nov. 16 on Netflix.

Right now, the world seems like a nasty, harsh place. There can be little doubt that the Coen Brothers (*Fargo*, *No Country for Old Men*) feel that way, too, tackling some of the crueler aspects of life in their latest film. *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* is an anthology, containing six individual stories about a bevy of characters living in the old West.

While many movies in this genre are grandiose and display heroic individualism on the part of its protagonists, this movie does something quite different. In this Western, pioneer life is short, brutish and inhumane.

It may not seem like a fun night of movie watching, but the film is also sharply written and grimly humorous.

Overall, this set of stories doesn't feature many big twists like in episodes of *The Twilight Zone*, but it does feature keen observations on our darker nature through the exceptional performances.

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Like most compilations, some tales are more memorable than others (although it may depend on one’s personal tastes).

For this reviewer, the titular opening is one of the stand-outs, featuring the balladeer outlaw gunslinger, Buster Scruggs (Tim Blake Nelson). His all-white duds and affable manner along with the amusingly lyrics and old-fashioned melodies are hilariously contrasted by violent confrontations with those he encounters.

Another highlight is a tale involving a gold prospector (Tom Waits), who finds a gorgeous, undisturbed plot of land and proceeds to dig it up in the hopes of making his fortune. The reaction of nearby animal residents at the beginning and end of the segment tell us all we need to know about how the natural world feels about the humans featured.

The following segment involving a romance between two members of a pioneer caravan making their way across the plains (who are continually pestered by an incessantly barking dog) also has a potent and effective close.

Even the tales not mentioned here have their moments.

There’s a really funny philosophical conversation about human nature and its relation to possums from the final segment and a couple of big laughs and literal gallows humor contained in another.

There’s perhaps only one fable for this reviewer that may have overextended its welcome, simply because it became clear where it was going a bit too early. Still, it’s well performed.

This is a good-looking movie as well. Designed like one is reading through a dusty old book, each tale begins with the flipping of pages and a nicely rendered image of what is to come. It’s a fun transitional device and one that even allows viewers to read the final paragraphs of each particular story as it comes to a close (one hopes the words are still readable to viewers

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watching on smaller, Netflix-equipped devices).

The score by Carter Burwell is also excellent, veering from cheery musical, to suspense as well as somber tones.

While the grave events, low-key approach and dark humor may not appeal to all, this is a very above-average anthology that should impress those going in expecting a more modern, updated take on the genre.

The Ballad of Buster Scruggs delivers a sad, heartbreaking and humorously macabre tune, but one that is well worth hearing.

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