

‘Miss Bala’ softens its story’s rough edges, but loses its impact

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
Friday, 08 February 2019 08:32



Rating: «« out of «««««

Running Time: 104 minutes

It’s probably not the best of signs when a critic begins a review stating sometimes the best of intentions can go wrong. *Miss Bala* is an attempt at a gritty crime thriller and boasts an unusual role for its star, best known for her work on a comedy/drama TV series.

This tale is actually a remake of a well-regarded 2011 Mexican film about a beauty pageant contestant turned hardened criminal. But like most Hollywood redos, this effort softens out all the rough edges and adds a shiny gleam to proceedings. In the process, it appears to have lost whatever might have made it distinctive.

Gloria (Gina Rodriguez) is a sweet-natured, Los Angeles-based make-up artist who agrees to head south of the border and help childhood friend Suzu (Cristina Rodlo) compete in the Miss Baja beauty contest.

After going to a club in the hopes of impressing a judge, the two find themselves in the middle of a violent shootout. Suzu disappears and Gloria finds herself under the control of drug cartel boss Lino (Ismael Cruz Córdova). He forces her into acting as a mule, promising he will help her

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find her friend if she completes certain tasks for him.

Also pressured by DEA agents to help them take down Lino, Gloria struggles to find her pal and a way out of the organization.

Rodriguez is a likable heroine and one could easily see her as the lead in more films, but the script provided doesn't give her much to showcase.

Gloria is more or less terrorized by Lino and gang members for a great deal of the running time. She spends most scenes placating them and waiting for the villains to turn away so she can give a disturbed and disapproving expression.

The cliches and one-note supporting characters pile high very quickly... the villain even has a henchman who is suspicious that Gloria may be trying to undermine them. There's nothing here viewers won't have seen before, and as a result, it gets old very quickly.

Another error in adapting this tale may have been changing the lead character and making her an American. Once she arrives in Mexico, Gloria encounters nothing but corrupt policemen, criminal thugs and morally questionable DEA agents, along with gunfights and explosions.

After seeing Gloria work as a make-up artist in LA, the consequences of this change are that it unintentionally ends up presenting Tijuana as a veritable hive filled with nothing but nefarious characters. One thinks the city's tourism board will be less than impressed with this title.

Even the action leaves something to be desired. Confrontations are covered in a shakey, hand-held style and aren't particularly dynamic or threatening.

Those hoping for Gloria to kick butt will also be disappointed and essentially left waiting until the climax.

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Of course, it's an extraordinarily difficult task to create a gritty crime thriller while maintaining a PG-13 rating. Truthfully, the makers would have been better off to either get uglier and embrace an R rating, or go for an exaggerated tone and turn its star from a timid woman into an unstoppable force of nature.

There's a lot of talent and effort visible here (along with a likable lead), but it just doesn't come together.

In recent years, we've seen movies like *Sicario* tackle similar themes and really deliver chills as well as thought-provoking analysis of the situation. In comparison, *Miss Bala* plays like a B-movie, and one that still ends up shying away from even delivering pulpy thrills. This flick just doesn't make an impact.

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