

True History of the Kelly Gang' is bleak and brutal

Written by gallupsun
Thursday, 23 April 2020 23:32

Rating: 2 out of 4 stars

Running Time: 124 minutes

This feature from IFC Films debuts “on demand” on various cable and digital platforms April 24th.

Since the beginning of storytelling, outlaws have always held a certain fascination with the public. Even those unfamiliar with the history of Australia have probably come across the name Ned Kelly at some point in their lives. This figure was raised in and roamed across the Australian bush during the 1870s, when the country was still a UK penal colony. His various crimes, including robbery and the murders of several policemen earned him respect and support among the nation's poor (whom historians agree were mistreated by authorities).

Kelly's violent outbursts against those who wronged him ultimately established the man as one of the biggest cultural figures in the country's history.

Over the years, there have been roughly twenty titles inspired by Ned Kelly... movie trivia hounds should take note of the fact that the very first feature film ever released was based on the figure, and that Mick Jagger, Heath Ledger and even Yahoo Serious have all played Kelly onscreen. Oddly enough, the newest adaptation named *True History of the Kelly Gang* isn't exactly as advertised. It is based on a popular work of fiction by author Peter Carey, and is not an accurate retelling of the legend, but rather a very loose adaptation based on the famous figure's life.

This tale starts with a young Ned Kelly (Orlando Schwerdt) enduring arguably the worst childhood in history. His Irish family, forced to move to Victoria after his dad is convicted in the UK, lives a bleak existence in the bush as his father serves time. Ned is devoted to his blunt and often cruel mother Ellen (Essie Davis), who provides sexual favors to British officer Sgt. O'Neil (Charlie Hunnam) in order to keep the family afloat. Mom soon makes the acquaintance of outlaw Harry Power (Russell Crowe) and decides to sell Ned to him.

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The crook teaches the boy how to survive in a cruel and vicious world. Later, a grown Ned (George MacKay) returns home to find his family now under the control of Constable Fitzpatrick (Nicholas Hoult). After the officer begins making advances to a couple of women in Ned's life, violence erupts and the protagonist becomes a fugitive.

Early on, the story is heavy with narration. It spends approximately 40 minutes of time focusing on young Ned and the terrible people in his life, including cruel British officers, awful father figures, and a cold mother. It certainly details how horrific conditions were and it's clear that great effort was taken to make the period look incredibly grimy, unpleasant and authentic. However, these early sections begin to feel very repetitive and overwrought.

Even when the adult Ned (who should really just cut ties with everyone in his life) decides to come back to his family, these characters haven't changed. The new foes introduced are also more of the same and just as unsavory as their predecessors, making one wonder why so much time was spent on the earlier years of his life.

Perhaps it is part of the feature's point to back its protagonist into a corner and detail the injustice heaped upon him, but the consistently oppressive tone doesn't produce the tension hoped for. Most viewers, myself included, will be most curious about the lead's time rebelling as an outlaw, yet the movie doesn't seem all that motivated to get to Kelly's life on the run. It would all be a real slog were it not for the fine work of the cast. While what's going on is consistently nasty and humorless, at least it's filled with excellent performers giving it their all and trying to add some sort of individuality and nuance to the damaged characters.

The photography is also beautiful, with incredible scenic images of the stark bushlands. And there are impressive shots when the movie gets to its climax, featuring the leads decked out in makeshift armor and helmets and shooting at officers as flames rise around them.

There are elements of *True History of the Kelly Gang* that are intriguing and the cast is solid, but this still doesn't seem like a perfect adaptation of Ned Kelly's life. It's certainly hell-bent on displaying the ugliness of Australian existence in the 19th century, but certain story elements could have used extra attention and the pacing more zip to keep one enraptured in this legendary figure's life.

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