

SICARIO Is Complicated and Compelling

Written by By Glenn Kay
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Rating: <<<< out of 4

Running Time: 121 min.

While there have been plenty of movies over the past few years depicting drug cartels, Sicario stands apart from the vast majority and adds several new wrinkles to the formula. It paints a more detailed and complicated picture of a disturbing situation, and asks serious questions about the tactics and methods used by its characters.

Kate Macer (Emily Blunt) is an idealistic FBI agent asked to volunteer as part of a special task force out to capture an unnamed figure in the Mexican drug trade. Hoping to make a bigger difference in the escalating trafficking battle, she dives in, but finds her superiors secretive and unwilling to elaborate on her role within the group. The two main players are the evasive Matt (Josh Brolin) and the even more mysterious Alejandro (Benicio Del Toro). They won't even tell her who they are or what their official titles are, but before long they are all partaking in secret and illicit missions across the border in Juarez.

The protagonist is an observer at first, trying to catch up on the cryptic conversations between others in the force and understand the ins and outs of what is occurring (much like the audience). Motivations are murky at best, and only come to light later in the film as she becomes more invested in events. The task force seems blasé about much of what they do and the illegal methods they use (including physical violence and horrific personal threats) to find the target they're looking for. This creates a strong sense of distrust in the characters around Kate and results in even more tension.

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As expected, the casting is excellent. For much of the movie, you're never quite sure whether or not you should believe what you're hearing. Blunt is entirely relatable as the overwhelmed young agent - one can certainly identify, as her life is put into jeopardy after the sinister aspects of the operation come to light. A constant, low-thumping score also helps amplify the nervousness.

Roger Deakins (Skyfall, Prisoners, No Country For Old Men) captures the drama beautifully in a cool, distanced manner. Despite the hot locale, the visual style is cold with blown-out desert landscapes and ghostly thermal vision. During the transport sequences, cameras are mounted on the vehicles giving a great point-of-view aspect to the situation. There are also a lot of overhead omnipresent angles showing maze-like environments in the city and desert. These shots give the impression of being watched by an unseen figure, and help add to the paranoia. It's a wonderfully photographed film.

This is an untraditional take on a subject popular in Hollywood. While there are some confrontations and shootouts, it isn't presented in a typical action film format. And the events themselves don't always play out in the expected manner. It may feel frustrating to some, but the unpredictability of what happens was quite interesting to this reviewer.

It's clear that director Denis Villeneuve (Prisoners, Enemy) finds gray morality and questionable ethics a great subject of interest. Yet at the same time it's clearly asking questions about the decisions of the government (re: foreign policy) and the individual, as well as showing the ramifications of their choices - which often have a negative, ugly impact on tangential parties.

Every character is implicated in some way in the brutal violence depicted. Some characters are out for revenge, while many are attempting to create chaos and "stir the pot" in the hopes of destabilizing power. And deals are being made behind the scenes with figures who are just as bad, if not worse, than the targets. It all feels circular, like an unstoppable spinning wheel. Late in the film, there's a literal metaphor for the lead character and the deep, dark situation she's found herself in - it seems that no amount of noble idealism or individualism is going to make much headway.

In the end, Sicario isn't a feel good movie. However, it is a very dark, harrowing and compelling trip that is tense to witness and always phenomenal to look at.