

'The Magnificent Seven' is pretty darn average

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: «« out of 4 stars

Running Time: 132 min.

This week's most prominent release is *The Magnificent Seven*, and it certainly has big shoes to fill. Based on the 1954 Japanese film

Seven Samurai

, the 1960 original starring Yul Brynner and Steve McQueen is one of the most popular Westerns of all time — it even earned the approval and praise of the source material's director, Akira Kurosawa. Now, a new version saddles up with some famous faces in front of the camera.

In this retelling, cruel industrialist Bartholomew Bogue (Peter Sarsgaard) has the town of Rose Creek under his control, pushing citizens out with intimidation and destruction. Young widow Emma Cullen (Haley Bennett) seeks vengeance for the death of her husband and hires bounty hunter Chisholm (Denzel Washington) to protect the village.

Chisholm recruits a troubled team that includes alcoholic gambler Josh Faraday (Chris Pratt), sharpshooter Goodnight Robicheaux (Ethan Hawke), assassin Billy Rocks (Byung-hun Lee), outlaw Vasquez (Manuel Garcia-Rulfo), tracker Jack Horne (Vincent D'Onofrio), and Comanche warrior Red Harvest (Martin Sensmeier). Together, they set out to stop the robber baron Bogue.

In the past decade or so, we've seen cable shows like *Deadwood* and *Hell on Wheels* really turn up the grittiness. Films like

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The Proposition

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The Homesman

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Slow West

, and

Django Unchained

have spun a lot of these well-worn tales in completely unique, new directions.

Yes, this flick updates certain aspects of the story for modern audiences. However, it remains surprisingly traditional in other respects, paying homage to the films of the '50s and '60s to a fault.

There are a few plusses. Hawke gets in a few good moments as a sharpshooter facing a crisis of confidence (just like the Robert Vaughn character in the original); additionally, Rocks and Red Harvest offer roles that are a little different from the original formula.

The action itself is well handled, with the grand finale shoot-out featuring some impressive horseback tricks.

Yet it all comes across as a little flat. These are supposed to be flawed characters looking for redemption and straddling the line between hero and villain. Here, they don't look menacing, like men who could kill you as soon as look at you. These are PG versions of those kinds of guys.

Washington exudes intensity, but he's pretty much the same here as in other recent projects. Co-lead Pratt is a likeable screen presence, but he feels miscast; he's just too goofy as an alcoholic card shark with a violent streak.

I couldn't help but lament the lack of edginess onscreen; I missed the craggy and weathered faces you might see in old genre titles.

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Ultimately, this project is all about Hollywood stars playing gunslingers. The leads look a little too, well, good to really take seriously. A couple of them do appear scruffy, but the majority are well-groomed. This is a strange thing to notice, but a few of them had pretty darn good hair for desperados. It's like the make-up department stopped after putting a light bit of dirt on their face and spritzing them with a water bottle. As events progress, one can always imagine the numerous Honeywagons, craft service tables, vehicles, and crew just out of frame.

There also isn't nearly as much emphasis on the relationships between the hired guns and the villagers themselves. It's all very simple and revenge has more to do with the motivations of the main characters than anything else.

The story is also hurt by the lack of an evil presence. The Bogue character's screen time can't be more than 10 minutes in total. Sarsgaard tries his best, chewing as much scenery as he can in his two brief scenes before the climax. In the end, it's just not enough time for the character to make an impact.

To be fair, *The Magnificent Seven* is passable entertainment in the moment. However, that's not really strong enough justification for its existence. It may be paying homage to old Hollywood, but the movie still feels inauthentic and distancing. Even worse, the film appears to be content with only a few minor updates and alterations (often simplifications) to the original story. This is a remake that probably won't be remembered a year from now, let alone 50.

***By Glenn Kay
For the Sun***