

Hostiles

They used to be standard fare in movie houses: “classic” Westerns, typically featuring laconic heroes, stoic sidekicks, cavalry units, Indian attacks, ladies in distress, exquisite photography of handsome scenery, moody, plaintive sound tracks, etc.... They don’t make ‘em like that anymore—except they just did in Scott Cooper’s “Hostiles,” and, in displaying all of the above elements, the film can stand proudly among its many forebears.

The time is 1892 at Fort Berringer in New Mexico territory. Tough-as-leather Army Captain Joe Blocker (Christian Bale), near retirement, grudgingly takes on the assignment of escorting a dying Cheyenne war chief Yellow Hawk (Wes Studi) and his family back to die in his tribal land in Montana. Yellow Hawk has been imprisoned at the fort for several years with his family, including son Black Hawk (Adam Beach). Blocker, a fierce Indian fighter, resents protecting a figure he regards as a vicious enemy, but he’s forced to undertake the task, which is immediately complicated when his small band runs across a traumatized widow Rosalie Quaid (Rosamund Pike) who has lost her husband and children in a vicious Comanche raid on their homestead.

The dogged journey (captured in vivid landscapes by cinematographer Masanobu Takayanagi) is initially punctuated by personal and philosophic exchanges between the stern Blocker and his team, including veteran comrades like Sgt. Metz (Rory Cochrane) and Corp. Woodson (Jonathan Majors), but it is interrupted by an encounter with the aforementioned Comanches, resulting in a bloody skirmish. Further on, the group faces an enemy just as vicious, a gang of bandits who take Mrs. Quaid and the chief’s daughter (Q’orianka Kilcher) hostage and must be dealt with. After a visit to another fort, Blocker and Co. take on another charge, an AWOL sergeant (Ben Foster) scheduled for judgment at another outpost. Even with the job finally accomplished—the return of the chief to his happy hunting ground, one last stand off comes when the captain’s band is challenged by a roughneck rancher out to protect his land from Indian claims. It’s one dang thing after another...

Yet the telling of this Western saga is done with such panache and understated elegance by Cooper (“Crazy Heart,” “Black Mass”) and his cast that it carries you along on this trek and makes you believe its sturdy storytelling. The trail rhythms and incidents are strongly etched and, indeed, classic. The violent elements—there are plenty, fully earning its “R” rating—are brutal, but quick, not lingered on or romanticized and fully believable in context. The hint of romantic sparks between Blocker and Quaid are just that, hinted at and not overplayed. Reticence and respect rules this relationship. The resentful Blocker gradually softens and comes to appreciate his Cheyenne charges (who also hate Comanches) but gradually, plausibly, as part of a unit that has withstood trials together.

Christian Bale, an actor for all seasons and a Brit who has spent half a career playing Yanks, pulls off another adroit and convincing characterization as the taciturn captain, a man who bears—with bristly beard and drooping ‘stache—a 19th century face, one that does a lot of his acting silently, just listening to the people around him. Not to be outdone is Rosamund Pike (“Gone Girl”), also English, who morphs convincingly

from a bloodied mother in shock to a proper, well-spoken lady of the best moral stature—who can use a rifle!

John Ford himself might have approved of “Hostiles.”
(*This film is rated “R” for serious violence and runs 134 mins.*)

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