

## The Mustang

One of last year's best films was "The Rider," a superb semi-documentary fiction about a real rodeo rider deprived of his profession. Though an entirely different story and context, the new release, "The Mustang," brings resonances of the earlier film, showing the man-horse bond developing in the stark, dusty beauty of the American West. The films also coincide in this: both were made by non-American women.

"The Mustang" stars Matthias Schoenaerts as Roman Coleman, an inmate serving in a Nevada prison for assaulting his wife. Solitary confinement rather suits him. As he says to the prison psychologist (Connie Britton): "'I'm not good with people.'" His only family connection is a thin one, shown when his pregnant daughter Martha (Gideon Adlon) shows up to ask him to sign a document ceding a family property.

A chance to escape solitary comes when Roman is given the chance to participate in an "outdoor maintenance" program as part of his state-mandated rehabilitation. That assignment requires that he participate in the wild horse training program at the prison. Though at first consigned to shoveling manure, he is encouraged by an outgoing fellow inmate and trick rider Henry (Jason Mitchell) and program boss Myles (Bruce Dern), a grizzled veteran trainer. Myles sees some potential in Roman, and he is ultimately accepted into the program.

Coleman is assigned one the wildest mustangs from the recent round-up, and, learning patience for the first time, eventually bonds with the horse, which he calls Marcus, then develops into a competent rider. His newfound industry and composure lead him to believe that he can participate in the program's finale: an auction of the newly-tamed steeds to practical uses in society and, for Roman, perhaps a new opening to Martha.

The symbolism of "The Mustang" is fairly obvious—one caged animal redeems another—but the honest, unflashy depiction of that redemption is done with such care and taste by French director/actress Laure de Clermont-Tonnere (here making her feature debut) that it just rings true.

De Clermont-Tonnere (who also co-wrote the film with two others) came to the project having explored this theme before in a prize-winning short film, "Rabbit," about a therapist who entrusts a small rabbit to a female prisoner to produce a calming effect. In an interview, she has said: "The goal is to reconnect, is to learn patience, to tame your own violence and anger. It's very therapeutic for those men to realize who they are." The film achieves this through her careful direction and Schoenaerts's believable transformation. De Clermont-Tonnere and her team also have an authentic Nevada landscape and a real (decommissioned) prison in which to shoot.

The Belgian Schoenaerts has made his reputation playing hard bitten tough guys (see, for example, "Bullhead" and "Rust and Bone"), and he is just as harsh here as a block of a man with a short fuse. We see him blow that fuse, especially in one scene when he ends up pummeling a skittish steed, but the film captures his hard-won empathy with patient resolve. The climax of that conversion comes in a heartrending passage between Roman and Martha in the prison's visitor's room, a scene that is the fulcrum of this movie. The film does not end with a neatly wrapped resolution, but with the possibility of a hard-bitten inmate finding his humanity.

*(The film is rated "R" for language and violence and runs 96 minutes.)*

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